

Responding to a Suicide: Postvention Guidance for Student Housing Managers



The Jed Foundation



college student
mental wellness
advocacy coalition

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Introduction

Student housing managers are typically trained to deal with emergencies, including fires, plumbing and electrical problems, natural disasters, potential crimes, and resident health concerns. Specific training in how to prepare and manage the community needs after a resident suicide is less common.

If a suicide occurs at a property you manage, you may feel unsure of what to do as you manage the tasks ahead. You may start to think about communication with law enforcement, your corporate team, your on-site support team, residents, and, of course, the family and loved ones of the deceased.

You're likely processing your own response and grief, while also managing the reactions of others in your community. It's a challenging task — likely the most difficult you'll face in your role. With training and support, you can navigate this time and serve as a valuable source of support for your community.

This resource is designed to help you through each step of a postvention response. You will learn what a postvention response is and how the problem of suicide is relevant to off-campus student housing operators. You'll also find suggestions for specific steps you might take in the immediate aftermath of a suicide and how to proactively plan for future responses.

Acknowledgments

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About The Jed Foundation

The Jed Foundation (JED) is a nonprofit that protects emotional health and prevents suicide for our nation's teens and young adults. We're partnering with high schools and colleges to strengthen their mental health, substance misuse, and suicide prevention programs and systems. We're equipping teens and young adults with the skills and knowledge to help themselves and each other. We're encouraging community awareness, understanding, and action for young adult mental health.

Connect with JED!

[Email](#) | [X \(formerly Twitter\)](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Instagram](#) | [YouTube](#) | [LinkedIn](#) | [Snapchat](#) | [Pinterest](#) | [TikTok](#)

About the College Student Mental Wellness Advocacy Coalition

The [College Student Mental Wellness Advocacy Coalition](#) is committed to a better understanding of its residents, encouraging open dialogue, and raising public awareness about the importance of mental wellness and its impact on students as they work to realize their full potential along their college journey and beyond.

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Postvention Overview

What Is Postvention?

“Postvention” describes actions that may be taken after a community suffers a suicide to provide immediate grief support, promote healing, and reduce the risk of future suicides resulting from the related distress and trauma. The term was originally used to refer to support for the people directly grieving a suicide. It now refers to not only supporting the bereaved, but also providing assistance to anyone whose risk of suicide may be increased after someone else’s suicide.

Postvention varies based on what the community needs and which interventions are used, but the purpose is the same: effectively and compassionately respond to the tragic loss.

According to the Survivors of Suicide Loss Task Force (2015), the specific goals of a postvention are to:

1. Help people heal from the grief and distress of suicide loss.
2. Reduce other negative effects of exposure to suicide, such as increased mental health impairments, relationship stress, substance misuse, and complicated bereavement.
3. Prevent suicide among people who are at increased risk after exposure to suicide, especially family members and significant others.

For detailed information about postvention on higher-education campuses, refer to [Postvention: A Guide for Response to Suicide on College Campuses](#). The resource was published by the Higher Education Mental Health Alliance (HEMHA) in partnership with many leading national mental health and suicide prevention organizations, including JED.

How Is This Issue Relevant to Student Housing Operators?

Off-campus student housing operators are uniquely positioned to help with postvention responses. Based on data supplied by [College House](#) and other sources, about 80% of full-time college students nationwide lived in off-campus

housing in 2023. That includes living in apartment and condominium complexes, in rental homes, and at home with parents or family members. With that in mind, it’s important to know that [three-quarters of suicides occur where people live](#).

3/4 of suicides occur in the place of residence.

How Prevalent Is Suicide Among the College Population?

It's hard to know for sure how many college students die by suicide each year. Data about the tragic events are not consistently collected and put into national databases.

We have some information to help us understand the scope of the problem. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the

37% of LGBTQ youth (ages 18 to 24) considered suicide in the past year.

Source: The Trevor Project, 2022

U.S. average suicide rate for 15- to 24-year-olds (the age range that includes most undergraduates) was 15.2 per 100,000 people in 2021. In a campus community of 20,000 students, we may expect an average of three suicide deaths each year. It's helpful to put that number in context: In the same year, that campus community could expect about seven accidental deaths and less than one death from medical conditions such as cancer, according

to CDC data.

The rates are higher in communities with a larger population of students who are male, older members of the age group, [American Indian/Alaska Native](#), or veterans. Rates are also [higher for those who live in rural communities](#) and those with ready access to lethal means, including dangerous medications and firearms.

You may also encounter residents who share or display suicide-related thoughts and behaviors. You can learn about the [early signs and symptoms of a suicidal crisis](#). Those thoughts and behaviors are much more common than people realize. In 2022, [over 16 million teens and adults](#) in the U.S. reported experiencing suicidal thoughts. Despite those discouraging numbers, most people who have suicidal thoughts find ways to cope and get the support they need.

There are several low-cost, accessible national programs that can provide training, including [Mental Health First Aid](#), [Question Persuade Refer \(QPR\)](#), and LivingWorks [Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training](#) (ASIST).

How Can Operators Support Onsite Student Housing Managers?

Ideally, operators have developed and shared postvention expectations, policies, and procedures before a response has begun.

If this is the case, then you will be familiar with the expectations of your role in this situation. You'll be better equipped to facilitate a rapid, compassionate, and effective response.

If a housing operator doesn't yet have a postvention protocol, this guide can help to build and adapt a customized set of policies and procedures.

How Can Operators Draw on Campus and Community Resources for Support?

When a postvention protocol is in place, you will have channels of communication with campus-based mental health professionals, such as the university counseling center. You'll likely be familiar with how to refer residents to on-campus support systems, including:

- Student wellness programs
- Walk-in support options at the university counseling center
- After-hours mobile crisis resources for enrolled students

With this information on hand, you'll be prepared to encourage and refer residents for expert assistance outside of campus resources, such as:

- Local grief support options in the surrounding community
- 24/7, national, no-cost alternatives, including [Crisis Text Line](#) and [988](#).

These resources can be preprinted or posted on the community website or portal in advance for rapid access and dissemination. See the appendix for a printable flier you can customize for your community.

Postvention Guidance

How to Respond Immediately

Your company may have a specific postvention protocol you should follow. The actions detailed in this section may support you in following that protocol.

After the sudden and unexpected death of a resident, the first priority is to contact local law enforcement. You should then immediately contact your supervisors and administrative leaders to help oversee and coordinate communication with others.

Law enforcement will attend to the death scene and begin an investigation. They will confirm the identity of the deceased and notify the next of kin. They'll then investigate the manner of death (suicide, homicide, accidental, natural, or undetermined).

Determining the manner of death can take a long time. It typically involves law enforcement, a medical examiner, and other public health officials. Please don't speculate about the manner of death. Instead, refer to the event objectively as a "death" until law enforcement or other public officials issue an official determination and in keeping with the wishes of the deceased student's family.

How to Communicate With the Community

Accuracy and compassion are the hallmarks of effective communication practices in postvention. This type of communication is designed to be protective of others, including family members, roommates, and friends of the deceased who are often coping with acute shock and grief. They are at heightened risk for mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress, complicated bereavement, and an increased risk of suicide.

Here are some specific tips to keep in mind:

1. Be sensitive to those grieving the loss of a community member, and offer hopeful messages about community support and healing.
2. Do not share specific information about the event, such as the method used in the suicide, and never share the name of the resident or other personally identifiable information (demographics, apartment number, etc.). Information should be restricted to the very basics, but generous in listing supportive resources.
3. Share clear information about how to access suicide-focused treatment and direct support, including where to go on campus for immediate help or how to connect to national, 24/7 help-seeking resources.

Always consult with your supervisors and administrative leaders before you communicate with family, roommates, or the residential community at large. Group messages, texts, or emails should be carefully reviewed to promote accurate and safe messaging. At most companies, messages should be approved by the legal and media teams. Following the right communication practices will help your company avoid legal consequences.

Ideally, operators should create and approve sample language in advance of a postvention event. See the example emails or group texts below — one for residents and one for residential staff.

In your email to staff members, insert information about your company's Employee Assistance Program (EAP), if one is available. The EAP is often able to provide up to three sessions of counseling at no cost.





For Residents

Dear Residents,

It is with heavy hearts that we inform you that the Campus Police Department notified us last night of a death that occurred at our property. The police have reported that no foul play is suspected, and there is no active threat to the community.

We understand that residents may be impacted by this news. The university has resources available for anyone who wishes to receive support. Please reach out to the numbers below:

- University Counseling Services (XXX-XXX-XXXX)
- Dial 988, a [national suicide and crisis lifeline](#)
- [Text HOME to 741-741](#) to reach a volunteer crisis counselor

We grieve with you and are here to offer support. Please call our front desk (XXX-XXX-XXXX) if you need anything.

Sincerely,
[Insert name]
Housing Manager



For Staff

Dear Staff Members,

I am reaching out to inform you that the local police department has confirmed that a resident died on our property last night. An investigation is underway, but the police have reported that no foul play is suspected. There is no active threat to the community at this time.

We understand that residents and staff will be deeply impacted by this news. Please be compassionate when interacting with residents and your colleagues. Offer your condolences during this difficult time. Please refrain from commenting about the manner of death. If you are approached by the media, please refrain from commenting and refer them to me or a member of the executive team.

You can take specific steps to refer residents and other members of the community to sources of support. The university has the following resources available to those who wish to receive grief support. Please recommend that they reach out to the numbers below:

- University Counseling Services (XXX-XXX-XXXX)
- Dial 988, a [national suicide and crisis lifeline](#)
- [Text HOME to 741-741](#) to reach a volunteer crisis counselor

To support you, [Company Name] offers counseling services through our Employee Assistance Program that can be accessed via [link or phone number]. Please do not hesitate to reach out if you need to talk to someone.

Thank you for your compassionate work to support our residents. We are grieving as a community. I know we can help support one another through these difficult times and begin the process of healing. Please call or text me (XXX-XXX-XXXX) if you have any questions or need additional referral information.

Sincerely,
[Insert name]
Housing Manager

For University Staff

Preference: Make a phone call to your pre-established contact person, and then follow up with an email.

Dear University Professional,

I am reaching out to inform you that the local police department has confirmed that a resident who is also an enrolled student at X University died on our property last night. An investigation is underway, but the police have reported that no foul play is suspected and that there is no active threat to the community at this time.

We understand that students — both on and off campus — and the entire campus community will be deeply impacted by this news. We are following our company's postvention protocol, which includes an email notification to our residents and staff (similar to this one), along with providing multiple resources to help them cope with this tragic event.

We are providing the following to our staff and residents:

- University Counseling Services (XXX-XXX-XXXX)
- Dial 988, a [national suicide and crisis lifeline](#)
- [Text HOME to 741-741](#) to reach a volunteer crisis counselor

Please alert us to any and all additional resources for grief support that are available to students. We want to remain aware of and aligned with X University's postvention policies and practices to provide coordinated grief support for our resident students in the days, weeks, and months ahead.

Thank you for your compassionate work to support our students. We are grieving as a community. I know we can help support one another through these difficult times and begin the process of healing. I can be reached at (XXX-XXX-XXXX).

Sincerely,
[Insert name]
Housing Manager



How to Handle Media Concerns

Communication with the media after a resident's death is outside the scope of your role, but it's important to know how information about student death is being shared with media outlets, newspapers, and social media platforms.

If you're approached by the media, refrain from commenting. Instead, follow your company's guidelines for media inquiries, which includes immediately reaching out to your internal communications team and possibly coordinating with the university communications department. Ideally, a postvention plan will establish communication channels with university officials as a way to prepare for these scenarios.

How to Facilitate Rapid Support

You may be assigned the following tasks when organizing and facilitating support after losing a resident to suicide.

Mobilizing Internal Staff

As you respond to the event, you will need to share important information with a select group of staff members in a sensitive, streamlined manner. It's best to use secure platforms for communication and avoid sharing too much information by email. You may also rely on phone conversations or messaging groups by invitation only.

All members of the group should be trained on appropriate communication practices, such as not forwarding messages beyond the group. That will help you avoid having sensitive information leak out, which can violate best practices around safe messaging and be perceived as disrespectful to the family of the deceased.

Communicating With the Deceased's Family

You can provide immediate support to families and significant others who are deeply impacted by the loss of their loved one. Rely on your supervisor's experience when communicating with family and significant others. These conversations can take place in person or over the phone after law enforcement or health officials have notified the next of kin.

Your role is to offer heartfelt condolences and listen. You may also provide recommendations for immediate professional support, including crisis counseling and bereavement services in the community.

Keep in mind that this is often the worst day in the life of a parent or significant other. Simply being supportive, sensitive, and respectful are often viewed as the most helpful strategies for those experiencing acute grief.

Phrases such as, "I'm so very sorry for your loss," and, "I'm here to help you," are supportive. When it's hard to know what to say, try, "Please know that I care." You might say, "In addition to offering my most sincere condolences to you and your family, I have information about grief support services you might consider during this difficult time."

If the incident occurred in a unit, follow your company's guidelines for hiring a professional biohazard team to clean. This is an important step in many student deaths, and it can be an overwhelming process for a new manager. It's imperative that the unit be cleaned after law enforcement has finished their investigation and before the family arrives to gather personal items. You may need to help pack personal items or schedule a time for the family to retrieve items.

Supporting Roommates and Close Friends of the Deceased

You may also be tasked with having in-person conversations with roommates or close friends. In these instances, your role is to offer heartfelt condolences to the roommates and friends, to listen, and to offer supportive options for

follow-up care. That could include offering alternative accommodations to roommates until the investigation is complete and the unit is restored. A unit transfer or release from their lease agreement may be appropriate with your supervisor's approval and in alignment with your company policies.

You'll ideally be aware of grief support services offered by the university as part of postvention planning. If not, you can contact on-campus student support professionals and then share those resources with residents.

You can also offer physical spaces within the community for those affected to come together and access resources. You might, for instance, offer a lounge as a private place for residents to get information about finding support.





Working With Law Enforcement, Local Health Departments, and University Officials

You may be asked to communicate with law enforcement personnel during the course of their investigation, especially if you discovered the reported occurrence or were the first to be notified about it. Before communicating more with law enforcement, contact your administrative supervisors for guidance to make sure you follow the housing operator's protocols. The same guidelines apply to communications with university and local health officials.

Observing and Helping to Manage Acute Grief and Stress

Friends, classmates, and other residents may need additional support as they grieve, both during the acute stress period and beyond. These reactions are normal and expected. It's important to be prepared to listen and offer additional referral options beyond the initial period of grieving.

Roommates in particular may continue to experience significant and acute grief for several weeks or months after the suicide death of a peer. Reminders of their peer's absence are omnipresent. In some cases, residents may have witnessed the death scene or efforts to revive their roommate. People who have been exposed to these traumatic events may benefit from a referral for more intensive follow-up or therapy.

Memorializing the Deceased

The topic of memorializing the deceased has been the subject of some debate. The general guideline is that suicide deaths should not be treated differently than other death events. Spontaneous on-site or campus-based memorials are not uncommon, but they should be time-limited, monitored, and designed to honor and mourn the deceased as part of the normal grieving process.

Considerable care and attention should be given to when, how, and to whom the artifacts are given after the memorial. It's best to consult the deceased's loved ones in advance and give them the opportunity to receive the tokens, cards, and other mementos at the end of the memorial.

Planning for Long-Term and Future Approaches to Postvention

After a suicide loss, off-campus housing communities should consider resources and strategies to address concerns that may emerge after the acute crisis period.



First, given the expected stressors with helping to coordinate and manage a postvention response, give yourself time to process and grieve. Some companies offer EAP in their benefits package. If you need support beyond short-term counseling sessions, EAP can offer a referral to longer-term psychotherapy, which may be covered by your health insurance.

You may also ask for paid time off to allow yourself to adjust after these stressful circumstances. Housing operators are encouraged to consider offering these and other options to support their housing managers.



Second, off-campus housing communities should develop more permanent systems and structures. If a community doesn't already have a postvention response plan (PRP), start by reaching out to university staff. Many campus communities have well-developed postvention policies and procedures. The university's postvention plan can be consulted, blended, and linked with the housing community's customized PRP.

After the PRP is in place, housing operators should consider required postvention training for all student housing managers when first hired, plus an annual refresher training.



Operators and housing managers alike can join community-wide efforts to increase knowledge and awareness about suicide prevention strategies, the promotion of mental wellness, and the benefits of help-seeking more broadly.

Summary

This postvention guide, designed by The Jed Foundation in partnership with the College Student Mental Wellness Advocacy Coalition, provides specific recommendations for housing managers and operators when dealing with the tragic suicide loss of a community member.

Important takeaways for student housing managers:

- With support from your supervisor, offer sincere condolences when you talk with families and loved ones. If available and aligned with company protocols, direct them to sources of immediate support. Consider something like, “In addition to offering my most sincere condolences to you and your family, I have information about grief support services you might consider during this difficult time.”
- Be sensitive and respectful. It is often the worst day in a parent’s or significant other’s life. Always infuse responses with compassion and commit to listening intently to loved ones’ efforts to process these awful events.
- Have open lines of communication with campus-based mental health professionals who can offer services and programs to students who are grieving.
- Know about local grief support options in the surrounding community and 24/7, national, no-cost alternatives, including [Crisis Text Line](#) (text HOME to 741-741) and [988](#).
- Do not engage with the news media. Rely on your communications team to help with all media inquiries.
- Monitor the well-being of others, including roommates and friends who are working to process the unexpected loss of a peer, in the weeks and months after the death. When necessary, reshare the recommended support options offered during the acute period of grieving.
- Please take care of yourself. Coping with the loss of a community member impacts you and your staff members directly. Grief and loss are important considerations for the entire community, especially when you’ve led compassionate efforts to help your residents heal.

Appendix

References

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. National Vital Statistics System, Mortality 2018-2021 on CDC WONDER Online Database, released in 2021. Data is from the Multiple Cause of Death Files, 2018-2021, as compiled from data provided by the 57 vital statistics jurisdictions through the Vital Statistics Cooperative Program. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/ucd-icd10-expanded.html>

Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. (2017). Means Matter. [https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/basic-suicide-facts/where/#:~:text=About%20three%2Dquarters%20of%20suicide,the%20hospital%20\(NVISS%20data\)](https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/basic-suicide-facts/where/#:~:text=About%20three%2Dquarters%20of%20suicide,the%20hospital%20(NVISS%20data))

Survivors of Suicide Loss Task Force of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention. (2015). Responding to Grief, Trauma, and Distress After a Suicide: U.S. National Guidelines. <https://theactionalliance.org/resource/responding-grief-trauma-and-distress-after-suicide-us-national-guidelines>

Resources

[Postvention: A Guide for Response to Suicide on College Campuses](#). From the Higher Education Mental Health Alliance (HEMHA).

[Postvention: A Guide for Response to a Sudden Death at UC Davis](#). Example of an excellent postvention response plan from the University of California, Davis.

Resources for Support

We can all benefit from support during difficult times.
The following resources are available to you.

Local

University counseling center: _____

Local mobile crisis service: _____

National

Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: Call or text 988

Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741-741

LGBTQ Support from The Trevor Project: Text START to 678-678 or call 1-866-488-7386



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