



## HOLLYWOOD HOMELESS YOUTH PARTNERSHIP

# Issue Brief

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## Tragedy Response Protocol

### BACKGROUND

One of the hardest parts about working with youth experiencing homelessness is coping with the loss of young people to violence, suicide, accidents, and illness. While each agency within the Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership has developed their own rituals to support consumers and staff in the aftermath of a tragedy, we believe that a coordinated response across our service network will result in a more effective and trauma-informed response.

This document was inspired and liberally adapted (with their generous permission) from Portland's Homeless Youth Continuum's "Best Practices: Workplace Tragedy", a document produced in collaboration with Trauma Informed Oregon. This protocol is designed to provide a foundational philosophy and action steps around our collective response to tragedy and to offer best practices to agencies that are part of our network.

*"Grief is like the ocean; it comes in waves, ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim."*  
– Vicki Harrison



<sup>1</sup>Multnomah County (Portland, Oregon) Homeless Youth Continuum customized "Best Practices:Workplace Tragedy" document: [https://traumainformedoregon.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/HYC-Tragedy-Response-Plan\\_TIO\\_20171017.pdf](https://traumainformedoregon.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/HYC-Tragedy-Response-Plan_TIO_20171017.pdf).

This protocol is part of a series of publications developed by the Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership (HHYP) to advance policy and best practices focused on youth experiencing homelessness. The Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership is a strategic alliance of agencies serving youth experiencing homelessness in the Hollywood area of Los Angeles. This document was developed collaboratively with program staff at HHYP member and partner agencies and inspired by the work produced by the Homeless Youth Continuum in Multnomah, Oregon. This document is made possible through the generous support of the following foundations, the Vladimir and Araxia Buckhantz Family Foundation, the Dwight Stuart Youth Fund, and the Carl and Roberta Deutsch Foundation.

## GUIDING PHILOSOPHY

In the face of a tragedy within the HHYP service delivery system, we believe that providers need to:

- Pay attention to the needs of consumers (young people) and staff.
- Appreciate the complex grief reactions that may be exhibited by consumers and staff.
- Respond to tragedies with trauma-informed responses, being mindful that this event may take on special meaning for young people and staff in the context of past traumatic events.
- Support a collaborative HHYP response, including a single memorial, when the young people are served at multiple agencies in the system of care.
- Identify a primary and secondary contact at their agency to be the single point of contact in the aftermath of a tragedy. These individuals will be members of the HHYP Tragedy Response Team.

## HHYP TRAGEDY RESPONSE TEAM RESPONSIBILITIES

In order to reduce the need for multiple, system-wide emails in the aftermath of a tragedy, we will convene a virtual HHYP Tragedy Response Team to coordinate communication between and within HHYP agencies. Members of this team will:

- Act as single point of contact for agency-to-agency notification;
- Develop/refine the notification script for staff and youth consumers and share these across the network;
- Identify individuals that can provide informal consultation around the management of unique circumstances or needs, such as culturally appropriate rituals or legal advocacy;
- Develop or coordinate collaborative remembrance/memorial plans;
- Ensure that other key stakeholders outside of the HHYP are notified.

## NOTIFICATION

Agencies may learn of tragedies from the media, other consumers, law enforcement, family members, and other service providers. The most immediate concern is confirming the loss and notifying and supporting young people and agency staff.

### Best Practices – Confirming the Loss

- Before initiating a tragedy response and activating the HHYP Tragedy Response Team, it is important to confirm the loss/tragedy and to share this information with individual agency leadership and HHYP leaders.
- While we never act on rumors alone, experience has demonstrated that we should not ignore rumors either.

### Best Practices – Staff Notification

Each agency should notify their program managers/supervisors first and enlist those agency leaders to identify staff who are most engaged with the young person at the center of the tragedy. In the aftermath of a tragedy, even our most articulate staff can struggle to find the right words. The HHYP Tragedy Response Team will draft a script designed for staff. In addition, we recommend that agencies do the following:



- Notify staff verbally and in person within 48 to 72 hours, whenever possible, prioritizing those with the most contact with the young person.
- Ensure notification of all staff, including security, food service, and other staff. Young people may be connected to staff at your agency that is not reflected in your chart notes.
- Notify staff in private spaces, such as offices – not in hallways or staff lounges.
- Be sensitive to how you introduce the conversation. Give a heads up about the content of the conversation; explain that you have “sad news” to share.
- Be sensitive that some staff may not want to know details around a death. Provide all staff with an opportunity to make the decision about how much they want to know and when.
- Direct staff to refrain from sending out group emails with information about the tragedy.
- Instruct staff to refrain from posting information about the tragedy on social media, including vague references to a tragedy or death.
- Identify any agency resources that may be able to help staff process their grief.
- Consider the calendar of upcoming events and how the tragedy might impact their implementation.
- Consider how and when to notify former agency staff members.

## HHYP Notification

- Notify other HHYP agencies through their designated Tragedy Response Person about the loss/tragedy. Include any other names/aliases that the young person may be using.
- The HHYP Tragedy Response Team will draft and distribute to designated leaders a script explaining what happened – what is known and confirmed and what is not known.

## Best Practices – Youth Notification

The HHYP Tragedy Response team will develop a basic script to begin in-person notifications to youth. Depending on the timing and the circumstances of the event (e.g. a death of an individual living in a residential program), an agency may need to develop a more specific script on their own. In addition, we recommend that agencies do the following:

- Provide reminders to staff about how to offer support, how to manage discussions about death, and suicide risk and grief signs to watch out for.
- Try to inform youth individually or in small groups, not at large meetings.
- Schedule youth process/support sessions, as indicated.
- Develop a notification flier. Be thoughtful about where and how long fliers are posted.
- Be prepared for youth who come in weeks after the tragedy and learn of it for the first time.
- If the death was by suicide, do not describe the method. Some youth may already know the method but discourage open discussions about it.

## Best Practices – Remembrance Ceremony

HHYP Tragedy Response Team will recommend if and which agency should host the remembrance/memorial gathering. Seek to plan only one centralized event. In addition, agencies need to:

- Identify the agency person who will coordinate the event. This person should provide each speaker with a time limit and explain publicly that these limits are established to provide more people a chance to share.





- Identify who will facilitate the remembrance ceremony.
- Identify who will develop the remembrance flyer and/or program.
- Identify who will send out/e-mail flyer notifying the HHYP community about the remembrance ceremony.
- Identify who will attempt to reach out to family or other social supports.
- Consider adopting a ritual as a standard part of the memorial process.
- Remind staff of their role in the memorial. Some staff may attend to support youth, while others attend as mourners.
- As part of the ceremony, articulate the importance of honoring and remembering those whom have passed, while supporting and celebrating the individuals that are still here.
- If the death of the young person was due to interpersonal violence, consider whether any special measures need to be taken to protect staff and youth safety.

## ADDITIONAL COMPLEXITY

We know from experience that there are multiple variables that can impact the intensity of the response from consumers and staff. This includes, but isn't limited to, whether or not the individual was residing in one of our shelters or residential programs, if a suicide happened on-site, if other young people witnessed the event, or if the death was the result of violence between consumers. The agency and the HHYP Tragedy Response Team will need to take these variables into account as they plan notification and remembrance events. Additionally, agency and network staff will need to be thoughtful about the young person's or family members' cultural context and the traditions and rituals that may be appropriate. If more information is needed, we will ask for assistance to make the memorial service culturally appropriate and meaningful.

We worry about the unintended messages that are communicated to young people when we glorify the individuals who have passed and when the memorials to these individuals (photos, candles, alters) are maintained



in the milieu for long periods of time. While every situation is different, we strongly encourage that the staff thoughtfully reduce these reminders within a week after the passing. Some agencies have created memorial spaces in their agency that honor the passing of young people across time. Mementos and photos can be transitioned to this space.

## TIMELINES

While awareness of a tragedy in our system of care generates an immediate response, it is important to recognize the need for an on-going response to address the needs of young people and staff. These are key considerations during the first week, the first month, and longer term.

### First Week

- Consider when to restore the organization to its regular routine. We recommend that regular routines be restored within 2 – 3 days. This would mean that group and activity schedules would resume. Routine is important to grief recovery.
- Monitor youth for suicide risk and changes in behavior (isolation, withdrawal, escalation of behaviors).
- Monitor staff wellbeing and provide opportunities for 1 to 1 debriefing.
- Towards the end of the first week, take an inventory of the number of photos, memorials, and reminders about this young person that are present in this agency and consider how to start reducing these.

### The first month

- Monitor staff and youth wellbeing.
- Anticipate the relevant events that will be held by the organization that may be triggering to other youth or staff (e.g., OD Response Training following an overdose death, or attending a theater event with violent content following a violent incident).
- Consider how to debrief with staff to gather lessons learned. Be mindful about the guilt that some staff may experience, even when there is thoughtful intent to avoid any discussion of blame.
- Be mindful about ensuring that staff have been given available resources to manage their grief, e.g., through internal Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) or external referrals.
- Ensure that supervisors check in with their staff (both clinical and non-clinical) regarding how they are processing the loss.

### Longer term

- Continue to support and monitor youth and staff wellbeing.
- Keep staff and youth informed of grief supports.
- Be alert for changes in behaviors related to anniversaries, birthdays and other significant events. Agencies may want to make a note of these dates so that staff can be alert for changes in behaviors among the young people that were closest to the individual that died.
- Provide space for youth to remember youth that have died.
- Provide opportunities to recognize past losses (staff and youth- driven).
- Let youth and staff know it's normal to re-experience grief and sadness at significant times.
- Ensure that the Tragedy Response Team has opportunities to connect and debrief on a regular basis and that they have the resources that they need.



## Grief for Everyone

Grief is a part of our response to tragedy. People will experience grief in their own ways, which varies with each situation. Some ideas to consider related to trauma-informed care and grief include:

- You may experience many different feelings, some of them conflicting. None of them are wrong.
- You may experience feelings long after the tragedy.
- Sometimes after a death, instead of pain and sadness, you may feel mostly numb and distant. You may feel unaffected by a death. Sometimes your heart and your brain need distance from things. That is okay too.
- Trauma connects to trauma. When someone dies, it might make you think of everybody else you have lost or other bad things that have happened, both at work and in your personal life.
- Listen to yourself. Pay attention to your needs first and foremost.
- The feelings that come with grief are how we honor the person that is gone. We may find it helpful to remember their art, their dreams, and their funny moments. Sometimes grief is just a measurement of how awesome somebody was and how they were loved.

- There is not a right or wrong way to grieve. Please seek out resources that support you in your experience through grief.

## Grief for Staff

- Know when you are able to come to work and be present for people, and know when you need to step away.
- Working through an agency-related tragedy can feel very lonely once you go home for the day. It can affect you in ways you do not expect. You may feel isolated from your community and have a hard time explaining the impact of the loss.
- Be patient with our self and others. Grief has no timeline.

## SUMMARY:

No matter how clear our professional boundaries are, most of us will be personally touched, if not devastated, by the death of a young person in our care. This is true both when the loss is unexpected, and when the young person was on an obvious path of self-destruction that we were powerless to stop. While we all respond to tragedies differently, our ability to work together as individuals, as agencies and as a coordinated network team will be critical in our ability to heal.



## APPENDIX I: TRAGEDY RESPONSE CHECKLIST – FIRST WEEK

In the event of a critical incident involving the serious injury or death of consumer, staff member, or involved community member the following tasks are recommended:

### Agency/Staff Focused

- The physical safety of all agency consumers and staff has been confirmed.
- All relevant information about the incident has been brought to the agency's leadership.
- Agency staff members have been notified in person, whenever possible, with priority to those that were most involved in the care of the young person.
- Agency staff members have been informed of support available to them, including access to supervisors, managers, staff support meetings, Human Resources and Employee Assistance Programs.
- When appropriate, a debriefing of the incident has been scheduled at an appropriate time to review the incident in a safe and supportive manner, with the goal of improving policies and procedures to prevent future incidents of this nature.

### HHYP

- HHYP agencies and other community members have been notified of the incident.

### Youth/Family Focused

- Family members have been notified of the incident.
- A strategy of informing consumers of this incident has been determined by the Agency with an implementation plan.
- Consumers who were likely affected by this incident have been identified and informed in the determined manner.
- Consumers have been informed of the supportive services available to them, including but not limited to the following:
  - Gathering in safe spaces within the agency to meet with other consumers and staff to discuss the person, the loss, safety issues, etc;
  - Accessing mental health staff;
  - Participating in memorial services;
  - Participating in special projects to honor the victim.





## APPENDIX 2: SAMPLE SCRIPTS

Sample Youth Notification Script – general audience  
(delivered in person – individually or in small groups)

*I have sad news. Pat Jones died on Monday night. We don't have all of the details yet. Do you want to know what we know?*

*(If yes) The police said that they died from an overdose.*

*We know that this is upsetting. XX is available to talk to anyone individually. We are also going to use today's writing class to give folks at our agency a chance to share and write about Pat.*

*The Hollywood agencies that worked with Pat are planning a joint memorial for Friday at noon. As soon as we have the details, we will let everyone know. We will also be posting a flier.*

Sample Staff notification Script (delivered in person)

*We have sad news. Pat Jones, a young person that we have known for a long time, died on Monday night. We don't have all the details yet. Do you want to know what we do know? It is totally up to you.*

*(If yes) Police suspect that they died from a drug overdose but they are still investigating.*

*As is our policy, we are not sending out any group emails about Pat's death and we would ask you not to do that either. We will be telling our staff in person.*

*We know that it is very hard when we lose a young person. If you want to talk about this more, XX is available for you.*

*Are there any young people that we need to take special care with delivering this news?*

*Are there any staff or former staff that were specially connected with Pat?*

*We are working with the other HHYP agencies to plan a memorial. It is tentatively set for Friday at noon but we haven't confirmed all the details. We'll update everyone as we know more.*



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