



Practice Brief

HOLLYWOOD HOMELESS YOUTH PARTNERSHIP

TRAGEDY RESPONSE PROTOCOL: COVID-19 ADDENDUM

This protocol is part of a series of briefs related to working with young people experiencing homelessness.

IN 2018, THE HOLLYWOOD HOMELESS YOUTH PARTNERSHIP PRODUCED A TRAGEDY RESPONSE PROTOCOL – a document to guide our collaborative work and support young people in the aftermath of the death of a young person in our service community. **The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a review and update of our protocol in 3 ways:**

- 1) To expand the protocol to address community events, like pandemics;
- 2) To reduce the reliance on in-person communications and ceremonies around loss;
- 3) To elevate the parallel process of grief between staff and youth.



Staff Notification

STAFF NOTIFICATION AFTER A TRAGEDY NEEDS TO COMPLY WITH EVOLVING AGENCY PROTOCOLS AROUND IN-PERSON MEETINGS.

While face-to-face notification may not be possible, **staff should be notified verbally (by phone or video call) within 48 to 72 hours**, whenever possible, prioritizing those with the most contact with the young person.

Like in-person notification, **all conversations should be started by saying something like “I have sad news to share.”** If you are sharing a loss caused by COVID 19, be mindful if your staff members have lost other family members or friends to the pandemic.



In most circumstances, **staff should avoid sending out large generic group emails** with information about the tragedy. However, targeted group emails may be required if large numbers of staff are working remotely. Use the

subject line “SENSITIVE NOTIFICATION FROM TRAGEDY RESPONSE TEAM.”

Be attentive to staff needs. Identify any agency resources that may be able to help staff process their grief. Also identify any available staff or clinicians within your agency, through an EAP program, or through partner

agencies that may be able to provide individual or group support for impacted staff using available technologies.

If a staff member passes away due to COVID, follow the same protocol with staff, but also consider the impact on youth.

Youth Notification

Confirm the Loss. The first question youth and staff will likely ask is if the death is due to COVID-19. Confidentiality protections may make this difficult to confirm. Refer to local public health and agency leaders for guidance.

When possible, inform youth individually about the death in a private meeting, being mindful of physical distancing and masking requirements. While attending to grief, it’s important to use universal precautions, which include:

- **Wear a mask** and keep a minimum of 6 feet of distance.
- **Host the meeting in a private space outside,** or in a well-ventilated room.
- **Avoid prolonged contact.** Prolonged contact currently means being within 6 feet for more than 15 minutes, so try to limit the meeting to 15 minutes, if possible.
- **Prepare the table with gloves, tissues, and hand sanitizer.** Crying leads to increased nasal secretions that raise the risk of spreading COVID-19.
- **While physical touch is typically the way we console someone, it’s not currently advised.** Staff should imagine and practice what they will do to express care and comfort without the use of physical contact. This might include air hugs, or guiding them through soothing practices that are self-administered, such as a self hug or deep breathing.
- **Assemble a grief kit in advance** that includes transitional or sensory objects. Consider including a memorial object (photo of the person along with a sample of their poetry or art), a journal, Play-Doh, stress ball, coloring books, and a list of phone numbers for emergencies.
- **Assess youth’s technology access** so that staff can follow up with ongoing grief counseling.

Whether you are sharing the news with a young person over the phone or in-person, be sure to have resources readily available, including numbers for the suicide hotline, warm line, grief hotline, as well as COVID testing resources.

- The Warm Line at 1-855-845-7415
- The Suicide Hotline at 1-877-727-4747
- The Community Helpline at 877-541-2525

Grief will look different for everybody. Be prepared for some youth to express intense denial about the cause of death, particularly if it’s COVID-19 related. Due to generalized distrust of systems and government as well as mental health issues, some youth don’t trust that the virus is real.

When planning grief sessions, consider a virtual group, if possible. Consider the stability and social support of the participants, their peer relations, and cause of death.

Provide grief-informed harm reduction education as well as physical health education. This is especially true for youth who are isolated or at risk for substance use.



Ceremonies/Rituals/Memorial

The pandemic and restrictions around gatherings present significant challenges to creating a meaningful memorial event. Because agencies have different policies for in-person meetings, agencies may want to consider a hybrid memorial so that there is opportunity for in-person and virtual involvement. If an in-person memorial isn't possible, here are some ideas for alternate options:

- **Consider hosting a virtual gathering** on Instagram/Facebook/Zoom, if the participants have access to phone and internet. Prior to hosting a virtual gathering, consider who will join, the level of social support that they have, and their coping skills during social isolation. Be sure to provide opportunities for virtual support after the gathering ends.
- **Prepare grief kits** and encourage youth to write poems and create art memorializing the individual. Consider compiling submissions and publishing a zine to share electronically with the youth's social circle.
- **Plan to host an in-person ceremony after physical distancing measures are lifted** that celebrates all the lives lost during this time period.
- **Create a no contact ritual that youth could participate in.** For example, if space permits, consider starting a garden where youth could plant seeds and say a few words to memorialize their loss.
- **Some young people might be very distraught**, so reach out after the memorial and make a plan with them to further process their grief.

Coping with Loss: A Parallel Process

Agencies need to recognize that both youth and staff are experiencing grief and loss. When assisting young people with loss, it's important to recognize that many young people have experienced multiple losses in the past that have not been completely processed.

Primary losses are easy to identify. They are the loss of a person, object or job. All of these losses are common in the lives of youth experiencing homelessness and may or may not be the result of a death (such as disrupted attachments from primary caregivers and systems of care).

A Secondary Loss is the meaning associated with a specific loss. Secondary losses can include the loss of a feeling of belonging, loss of companionship, or loss of a feeling of safety in the world. It helps to not only recognize the primary loss, but also to identify and define the possible secondary challenges that may be associated with the loss. While secondary losses may be difficult to uncover, attending to secondary losses are key to grief recovery and healing.

YOUTH MAY EXPERIENCE AN INCREASE IN STRESS DURING THIS TIME DUE TO:

- Decrease in receiving in-person support from service providers, friends and family, which may lead to increased loneliness and isolation
- Interruption of daily routines
- More "thinking" time
- Loss of physical touch and personal connection
- Disruption to their normal routines
- An increase in reminders of loss, illness, and death due to talk of COVID-19
- Uncertainty, reducing stability which can make it hard to plan for the future

This is a particularly unique time in that staff are experiencing the trauma of the pandemic at the same time as the youth are experiencing it. Staff will be supporting youth while also experiencing primary and secondary losses in their work and personal lives. Just

like youth, staff may be experiencing a loss of routine, physical touch, personal connection, work stability, and/or loss of connection with coworkers. This may manifest in the workplace in a variety of ways, including difficulty thinking and communicating clearly, feeling anxious or impulsive from moment to moment, and possibly reaching for maladaptive solutions to manage stress. Because staff may be experiencing their own pandemic-related trauma responses, supervisors may consider monitoring workloads, reassessing what productivity looks like, processing compassion fatigue, and proposing self-care activities during supervision.

There are a variety of self-care activities that youth and staff may engage in during this time to manage stress.

We encourage youth and staff to experiment with a variety of self-care activities and learn what works best for them. Below is a list of some ways to practice self-care:

- Practice self-compassion and be patient with yourself and those around you. Recognize that everyone is stressed and may need some time to put their thoughts and feelings in order.

- Stay actively connected with support systems.
- Be mindful of news and social media consumption and know your tolerance.
- Try to maintain a routine.
- Move your body to reduce physical tension by stretching, taking deep breaths, or going on walks.
- Look for activities that help you relax. For example, going on walks, running, creating art, journaling, writing poetry, etc.
- Identify and acknowledge that bereavement is going to be more challenging during a pandemic.
- Make time for self-reflection, rest, and relaxation.
- Find ways to stay involved in causes that you are passionate about.

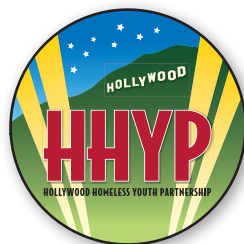
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RELATED ARTICLES

- [*Healing Justice, Transformative Justice, and Holistic Self-Care for Social Workers*](#) – Loreta Pyles
- [*The Art of Self-Care for Social Workers*](#) – Social Work Blog
- [*That Discomfort You’re Feeling Is Grief*](#) – Harvard Business Review
- [*Rethinking our Self-Care During the Pandemic*](#) – Mindful: Healthy Minds, Healthy Life

PODCAST EPISODES

- [*Self-Care for Social Workers During the Coronavirus Pandemic*](#) – NASW Social Work Talks
- [*Self-Care and Avoiding Burnout*](#) – NASW Social Work Talks
- [*Faith-Based and Secular Meditation*](#) – NASW Social Work Talks



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