

## DEATH OF STUDENT OR STAFF PROCEDURES

The MCPS Death of a Student or Staff Procedures were revised November 2019. Please see [Addendum B](#) of the Administrative Procedures Manual for the procedures tool kit.

OR please go to: <http://www.livebinders.com/play/play/1648224> for all MCPS forms, protocols and sample talking points

### **Crisis Response Team**

Each school will form a Crisis Response Team and identify an Crisis Response Team Leader for death of a student or staff who has overall responsibility for the duration of the emergency.

The Crisis Response Team will be composed of at least five or six people chosen for their skills, credentials, and ability to work compassionately and effectively under pressure—ideally a combination of administrators, counselors, social workers, psychologists, nurses, school resource officers and/or school's information technology or computer lab staff (See [Roles and Responsibilities Planning Worksheet](#) pg.12)

The Crisis Response Team will meet at least annually to review roles and responsibilities of members and death of a student or staff protocols.

In the case of a student or staff death, the Team Leader should immediately assemble the Crisis Response Team, which will be responsible for implementing the various elements of the response to the death of a staff or student. If the death is a suicide, the team leader should use the [Checklist for After a Suicide](#) on pg. 13 to guide responses. For non-suicide deaths, the team may use the Checklist for After a Death to guide responses.

### **Confirm Cause of Death**

The school's principal or superintendent will first check with the coroner and/or the medical examiner's office (or, if necessary, local law enforcement) to ascertain the official cause of death.

School staff will strive to treat all deaths in the same way. Nevertheless, because adolescents are especially vulnerable to the risk of **suicide contagion**, it is equally important to provide suicide prevention and education in addition to emotional support.

### ***If the Cause of Death Is Unconfirmed***

If the body has not yet been recovered or if there is an ongoing investigation, schools should state that the cause of death is still being determined and that additional information will be forthcoming once it has been confirmed. Acknowledge that there are rumors (which are often inaccurate), and remind students that rumors can be deeply hurtful and unfair to the missing/ deceased person, their family, and their friends.

If there is an ongoing investigation, schools should check with local law enforcement before speaking about the death with students who may need to be interviewed by the authorities.

### ***If the Family Does Not Want the Cause of Death Disclosed***

While the fact that a student has died may be disclosed immediately, information about the cause of death will not be disclosed to students until the family has been consulted. If the death has been declared a suicide but the family does not want it disclosed, someone from the administration or counseling staff who has a good relationship with the family will be designated to contact them to explain that students are already talking about the death amongst themselves, and that having adults in the school community talk to students about suicide and its causes can help keep students safe.

If the family refuses to permit disclosure, schools will state, *"The family has requested that information about the cause of death not be shared at this time"* and use the opportunity to talk with students about the phenomenon of suicide: *"We know there has been a lot of talk about whether this was a suicide death. Since the subject of suicide has been raised, we want to take this opportunity to give you accurate information about suicide in general, ways to prevent it, and how to get help if you or someone you know is feeling depressed or may be suicidal."*

### **Assemble Crisis Response Team and Assign Roles**

Once the death of a student or staff has been confirmed, the school Crisis Response Team Leader will assemble Crisis Response Team and assign the following team roles: Crisis Coordinator, Safety, Operations, Community Liaisons, Funeral, Media Relations, Social Media Coordinators.

### ***Crisis Response Team Leader's Responsibilities***

- Inform the school superintendent of the death. Superintendent will contact the Director of Communication and Technology.
- Contact the deceased's family to offer condolences, inquire what the school can do to assist, discuss what students should be told, and inquire about funeral arrangements.

- Call an immediate meeting of the Crisis Response Team to implement responsibilities.
- Establish a plan to immediately notify faculty and staff of the death via the school's crisis alert system (usually phone or e-mail).
- Schedule an initial all-staff meeting as soon as possible (ideally before school starts in the morning).
- Arrange for students to be notified of the death in small groups such as homerooms or advisories (not by overhead announcement or in a large assembly) and disseminate a death notification statement for students to homeroom teachers, advisors, or others leading those groups. ([see Sample Death Notifications Statements on pg. 17](#))
- Speak with school superintendent and Crisis Response Team Coordinator throughout the day.
- Determine whether additional grief counselors, crisis responders, or other resources may be needed from outside the school.

#### **Team Crisis Coordinator's Responsibilities**

- Conduct initial all-staff meeting.
- If death is a suicide disseminate handouts on [Facts About Suicide and Mental Disorders in Adolescents and Talking About Suicide](#) to pg. 22 and 23) faculty.
- Draft and disseminate a death notification statement for parents. ([Sample Death Statement for Parents, Pg. 19](#))
- Conduct periodic meetings throughout the day for the Crisis Response Team members to ensure needs of students, parents and staff are being met.
- Monitor activities throughout school, making sure teachers, staff, and Crisis Response Team members have adequate support and resources.
- Plan parent meeting if necessary ([See Sample Parent Meeting pg. 24](#))

#### **Safety Coordinator Responsibilities**

- Ensure that students follow established school dismissal procedures.
- Call on school resource officers or operation and maintenance supervisor for the district to assist parents and others who may show up at the school and to keep media off of school grounds.
- Assign a staff or faculty member to frequently walk the halls, checking bathrooms encouraging students to congregate in supervised areas, and/or encourage them to talk to a counselor or other appropriate school
- Assign a person monitor people entering the building and ensure they make it to their destination in the building

#### **Operations Coordinator Responsibilities**

- Assign a staff or faculty member to follow the deceased student's schedule to monitor peer reactions and answer questions.
- If possible, arrange for several substitute teachers or "floaters" from other schools within the district to be on hand in the building in case teachers need to take time out of their classrooms.
- Arrange for crisis counseling rooms for staff and students.
- Provide tissues and water throughout the building and arrange for food for faculty and crisis counselors.
- Work with administration, faculty, and counselors to identify individuals who may be having particular difficulty, such as family members, close friends, and teammates; those who had difficulties with the deceased; those who may have witnessed the death; and students known to have depression or prior suicidality; and work with school counseling staff to develop plans to provide psychological first aid to them.
- Understand and be prepared to address the procedures for memorialization to student, family and/or community members.

#### **Community Liaison Coordinators Responsibilities**

- Several Team members will be needed, each serving as the primary contact for working with community partners of various types, including:
  - coroner/medical examiner, to ensure accuracy of information disseminated to school community
  - police, as necessary, to ensure student safety
  - mayor's office and local government, to facilitate community-wide response to the death
  - mental health and medical communities, as well as grief support organizations, to plan for service needs
  - arranging for outside trauma responders and briefing them as they arrive on scene

#### **Funeral Coordinator Responsibilities**

- Communicate with the funeral director about logistics, including the need for crisis counselors and/or security to be present at the funeral.
- If death is a suicide, discuss with the family the importance of communicating with clergy or whomever will be conducting the funeral to emphasize the importance of connecting suicide to underlying mental health issues (such as depression) and not romanticizing the death in ways that could risk contagion. ([See Talking about Suicide pg. 23](#))

- Depending on the family's wishes, help disseminate information about the funeral to students, parents and staff, including:
- location
  - time of the funeral (keep school open if the funeral is during school hours)
  - what to expect (for example, whether there will be an open casket)
  - guidance regarding how to express condolences to the family
  - policy for releasing students during school hours to attend (i.e., students will be released only with permission of parent, guardian, or designated adult)
- Work with school counselors and community mental health professionals to arrange for counselors to attend the funeral
- Encourage parents to accompany their The Crisis Response Team Leader will designate one individual as the Team Coordinator.

#### **Media Relations Coordinator Responsibilities**

- Prepare a media statement (see [Sample Media Statements](#) on page 24).
- Contact District Director of Communication and Technology who will field media inquiries
- Advise staff that only the media spokesperson is authorized to speak to the media.
- Advise students to avoid interviews with the media.
- Refer media outlets to Reporting on Suicide: Recommendations for the Media.

#### **Social Media Coordinator Responsibilities**

- Oversee school's use of social media as part of the crisis response.
- Coordinate efforts to involve students to create and monitor social networking sites and other social media.

#### **Staff Communication**

A staff meeting will be conducted by the Crisis Response Team and should be held as soon as possible, ideally before school starts in the morning (see [Sample Staff Meeting Agenda](#) pg. 21).

If there is not enough time to hold the meeting before students have begun to hear the news through word of mouth, text messaging, or other means the Crisis Response Team Leader will first verify the accuracy of the reports and then notify staff of the death through the school's predetermined crisis alert system, such as e-mail or calls to classroom phones. *Remember that information about the cause of death should be withheld until the family has been consulted.*

#### **Initial Staff Meeting**

Allow at least one hour to address the following goals:

- Introduce the Crisis Response Team members and review roles.
- Share accurate information about the death.
- Allow staff an opportunity to express their own reactions and grief. Identify anyone who may need additional support and refer them to appropriate resources.
- Provide appropriate faculty (e.g., homeroom teachers or advisors) with a scripted death notification statement for students. Arrange coverage for any staff who are unable to manage reading the statement.
- Assign a point person to direct incoming parents, students community members to appropriate destinations.
- Ask teachers to submit attendance reports to office as soon as possible and instruct teachers to require student not leave the classroom alone.
- Ask teachers to be in the hallways and common areas during passing time. Staff will check bathroom for students clumping providing an alternative place for them to talk.
- If death is as suicide, prepare for student reactions and questions by providing handouts to staff on [Talking About Suicide and Facts About Suicide and Mental Disorders in Adolescents pg. 22 and 23.](#)
- Explain plans for the day, including locations of crisis counseling rooms.
- Remind all staff of the important role they may play in identifying changes in behavior among the students they know and see every day, and discuss plan for handling students who are having difficulty.
- Brief staff about identifying and referring at-risk students as well as the need to keep records of those efforts. ([See Referring at Risk Students form on MCPS](#) live binder)
- Apprise staff of any outside crisis responders or others who will be assisting.
- Remind staff of student dismissal protocol for funeral.
- Identify substitute teachers scheduled for the day and provide necessary support.
- Identify which Crisis Response Team member has been designated as the media spokesperson and instruct staff to refer all media inquiries to him or her.

#### **End of the First Day Staff Meeting**

If necessary, The Crisis Response Team Leader and/or the Team Coordinator may hold an all-staff meeting at the end of the first day. To:

- Offer verbal appreciation of the staff.
- Review the day's challenges and successes.
- Debrief, share experiences, express concerns, and ask questions.
- Check in with staff to assess whether any of them need additional support, and refer accordingly.
- Disseminate information regarding the death and/or funeral arrangements.
- Discuss plans for the next day.
- Remind staff of the importance of self-care.
- Remind staff of the importance of documenting crisis response efforts for future planning and understanding.

### **Student Support**

The staff will follow a regular school day schedule to ensure consistency. Teachers may want to postpone testing and/or any new information being taught to students. The Operations Coordinator will arrange for rooms for students needing assistance, coordinate mental health support staff for these areas and help monitor student response to the death.

#### ***Schedule Meetings with Students in Small Groups***

It will likely be necessary for the school to adjust the regular academic schedule in order to spend time with students to help address their emotional needs. The Crisis Response Team will develop a plan to deliberately and quickly reach out to all students to avoid an escalated emotional environment. Appointed adults will meet with students in small groups so that they can identify those youth who appear in need of additional attention.

In the case of suicide, counselors will go into the classrooms to give students accurate information about suicide, the kinds of reactions that can be expected after hearing about a peer's suicide death, and safe coping strategies to help them in the coming days and weeks.

Students will sign in when entering the counseling group meetings. Group meetings will follow a structured outline with time limits and address the following issues: 1) Discuss how students can identify and express their feelings; 2) Discuss practical coping strategies (including appropriate ways to memorialize the loss) so they may return their focus to their regular.

#### ***Identifying Students in Need of Additional Support***

The Crisis Response Team will identify students who were close friends or students who may need to be seen by a counselor. The Crisis Response Team will link students experiencing distress with mental health professionals in the school or community.

The Emergency Team Operation and Safety Coordinator will monitor school for students from other schools and direct these students to the appropriate support.

If the deceased student participated in sports, clubs, or other school activities an assigned Crisis Response Team member will attend the first practice, game, rehearsal, or meeting after the death to provide additional opportunities for students to appropriately acknowledge the loss.

#### ***Follow-up Student support***

For 3-5 school days following the death of a student or staff, support rooms will continue to be staffed by mental health professionals and available to students. The Crisis Response Team will continue monitoring students and student attendance.

Class counselor and/or principal will gather personal belongings and the principal or designee will return the belongings to family at appropriate time. Name of the deceased is to be removed from all data banks to prevent future mailings to the family (*no sooner than 2 days following notification of the event*). Needs to be a bullet under a to do

Crisis Response Team will evaluate situation and make arrangements for long term follow through (groups, classroom discussions, outside referrals, etc.).

School staff may also identify and reach out to families of students who are not coming to school.

## **Parent Support Meeting**

The Crisis Response Team may determine it is necessary to hold a parent meeting (see [Sample Parent Meeting Agenda](#) on pg. 24). If a parent meeting is deemed necessary, the Crisis Response Team Leader, Team Coordinator, all Crisis Response Team members, Regional director and the school principal should attend. Representatives from community resources such as mental health providers, county crisis services, and clergy may also be invited to be present and provide materials. If the death is a suicide, this is a good time to acknowledge that suicide can be a difficult subject to talk about and to distribute the relevant parent handouts.

The Emergency Team Leader or Regional Director will address all parents followed by small groups (8-10) facilitated by two counselors. The Emergency Team will allow at least an hour and a half for the parent meeting. Counseling staff may want to call parent/guardian of students who signed into the group meetings.

## **Community Coordination**

The school Crisis Response Team will establish and maintain open lines of communication with community partners such as the coroner/medical examiner, police department, mayor's office, funeral director, clergy, and mental health professionals.

## **Outside Trauma Responders**

If necessary, Crisis Response Teams will utilize trained trauma responders from other school districts or local mental health or crisis centers to work alongside the school's crisis team members—and to provide care for the caregivers.

## **Funerals and Memorials**

### ***Funerals***

Current research regarding helping students and staff with the grieving process advises against allowing funerals and memorial services to occur in school facilities. While this type of practice does still occur in smaller communities, due to limited venues, Missoula has many appropriate venues for memorial services. For these reasons, funerals for a deceased staff or student will not be held on school grounds. (An exception may be considered for Seeley-Swan High School, due to limitations of venues in the community. A request regarding use of Seeley-Swan High School should be made to the Superintendent.) The Crisis Response Team may provide students, families and staff logistical information regarding where or when the funeral will occur.

Crisis Response Teams will focus on keeping the regular school schedule intact to the maximum extent possible and encourage parents to hold the memorial service or funeral outside school hours.

If the family does hold the service during school hours, school will remain open and school buses will not be used to transport students to and from the service. Students will be permitted to leave school to attend the service only with appropriate parental permission (regular school protocols will be followed for dismissing students over the age of majority). The school will encourage parents to attend the funeral with their student.

### ***Memorials***

Current research regarding helping students and staff with the grieving process advises against allowing funerals and memorial services to occur in school facilities. While this type of practice does still occur in smaller communities, due to limited venues, Missoula has many appropriate venues for memorial services. A death of a student, staff or community member is deeply felt by the school community and may invoke the desire to make a memorial contribution. Current research advises against physical memorials to avoid prolonged grieving, which could be unhealthy. Physical memorials will not be allowed on school property however monetary donations will be accepted for student scholarships. Individual cases may be reviewed by the Superintendent/Designee

### ***Temporary Memorials***

Spontaneous memorials should not be encouraged and removed within 2 days. With ERT and the family of the deceased permission, students may create a school sanctioned temporary memorial at a site designated by the ERT. The family of the deceased will be given the memorial once it is taken down. The memorial site will be monitored by the Crisis Response Team specifically who for messages that may be inappropriate (hostile or inflammatory) or that indicate students who may be at risk.

Any commemorations outside of these guidelines must be approved by the district Superintendent/Designee.

Students and staff will be discouraged from wearing t-shirts or buttons bearing images of the deceased. If students come to school wearing such items, they will be allowed to wear the items for that day only but ask not to wear the item again to respect the needs of other students.

Students should be encouraged to memorialize the deceased in positive ways that do not put other students at risk or contribute to the emotional crisis that occurs after a death. Consult with the family before implementing any of the following ideas:

- Invite students to write personal and lasting remembrances in a memory book located in the counseling office, which will ultimately be given to the family
- Encourage students to engage in service projects such as organizing a community service day or sponsoring behavior health awareness programs.
- Invite students to make donations to the library or scholarship fund in memory of the deceased

Teachers may re-arrange seat assignments five days after the funeral. They will discuss this change with students before they rearrange seats.

School flags will not be flown at half-staff after a staff or student death.

### ***School Newspapers***

All news items regarding the student or staff death will be reviewed by a member of the Crisis Response Team. If the death was a suicide, the school paper may run articles to educate students about suicide warning signs and available resources.

### ***Events***

Dedications to students will not be allowed at school dances and extracurricular events. Students will be encouraged to organize fundraisers for organizations like the American Cancer Institute or suicide prevention awareness.

### ***Yearbooks***

Yearbook memorials will follow protocol outlining issues that journalists and others should follow when reporting about suicide and focus on suicide prevention. Yearbooks will not contain memorial pages dedicated to a single person who has died. Any questions about memorializing should be immediately discussed with the District Superintendent/designee.

### ***Graduation***

A brief statement acknowledging and naming those students from the graduating class who have died is allowed at the graduation ceremony. Final decisions about what to include in such tributes will be made by the administrator and members of the Crisis Response Team.

### ***Permanent Memorials and Scholarships***

Permanent memorials will be established off school grounds (see [\*Talking Points for Talking to Parents about Permanent Memorials\*](#) pg. 25).

Appointed school staff will meet with the student's close friends and family to talk about the type and timing of any memorialization such as :

- holding a day of community service or creating a school-based community service program in honor of the deceased
- putting together a team to participate in an awareness or fundraising event sponsored by one of the national mental health or suicide prevention organizations (e.g., <http://www.outofthedarkness.org>), or holding a local fundraising event to support a local crisis hotline or other suicide prevention program
- sponsoring a mental health awareness day
- purchasing books on mental health for the school or local library
- working with the administration to develop and implement a curriculum focused on effective problem-solving
- volunteering at a community crisis hotline
- raising funds to help the family defray their funeral expenses
- making a book available in the school office for several weeks in which students can write messages to the family, share memories of the deceased, or offer condolences; the book can then be presented to the family on behalf of the school community

### ***Media***

The Crisis Response Team Media Specialist will prepare a **media statement** and be the designated media spokesperson. Staff will be advised that only the media spokesperson is authorized to speak to the media. Students will be advised to avoid media interviews if necessary.

### ***Social Media***

A designated member of the Crisis Response Team (ideally someone from the school's information technology department) will meet with friends of the deceased and other key students to work collaboratively to manage social media regarding the deceased. Students recruited to help should be reassured that school staff is only interested in supporting a healthy

response to their peer's death, not in thwarting communication. They should also be made aware that staff is available and prepared to intervene if any communications reveal cause for concern.

Students and school staff will identify popular websites and online presence to communicate with parents, students and teachers about the funeral or memorial service (schools should of course check with the student's family before sharing information about the funeral).

### **On-Going Follow Up and One Year Anniversary**

The Crisis Response Team will develop a post-vention plan for the upcoming year to support students and school staff over the birthday of the person who died, holidays, athletic events in which the student would have played, the start of a school year, proms, graduation and the anniversary of the death. The plan may include reminding staff to be aware that students may experience an emotional reaction, provide staff education on early warning signs of suicide and how to respond to students at risk, remind staff of self-care and having grief counselors or mental health professionals on call.

### **Emergency Response Drills and Incident De-Briefing**

School Crisis Response Teams will conduct an annual drill to practice death of a student or staff procedures. When possible the school will include all staff in the drill (e.g. practicing scripts, identifying procedures).The team will debrief the drill and identify areas that may need improving.

Within one week of the incident, the Crisis Response Team will reconvene to evaluate emergency Response to Death of a Student or Staff Procedures will be reviewed every three years. ([See Debriefing Procedures and Action Plan. Pg. 29](#))

Debriefing the drill or incident will focus on identifying issues in an open and frank discussion that avoids placing blame. The team will report any recommendations to appropriate district personnel.