



Creating Comprehensive Strategic Plans: A Guide for Suicide Prevention Coalitions

Comprehensive strategic plans help suicide prevention coalitions focus efforts, identify priorities, choose high-impact strategies, and consider their unique capabilities, obstacles, and resources. This guide draws on the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC)'s [Strategic Planning Approach to Suicide Prevention](#) to help coalitions apply the community-focused strategies that are outlined in the *National Strategy for Suicide Prevention (National Strategy)*.

Creating a comprehensive strategic plan requires coalitions to complete every step of the planning process outlined in this guide. This takes time, so the best approach is to start where you are; use the data, partnerships, and resources available to you, and build your plan over time. Setting small, achievable goals can help you take meaningful steps toward suicide prevention in your community without overwhelming your coalition. Be sure to involve community members with [suicide-centered lived experience](#) in all parts of the planning process to help ensure your coalition's work reflects the needs, strengths, and realities of your community.

Who Is This Resource For?

This resource is intended for suicide prevention coalitions that are in the early stages of developing a strategic plan, have limited experience with strategic planning, have not updated their strategic plan in several years, or want to know if their current planning efforts are on the right track. The steps outlined in this guide provide a practical framework to help coalitions build, strengthen, or refine their strategic planning process.

Before You Begin

This guide works best when you connect local priorities with state and territorial suicide prevention efforts. Before you begin, reach out to your [state or territorial suicide prevention coordinator](#) to review their plans and work together. This guide is meant to support and strengthen existing suicide prevention plans, not replace them.



Step 1: Describe the Issue and Its Context

Start by understanding the issue of suicide in your community. Consider the following questions:

- Who is dying by suicide, attempting suicide, and having thoughts of suicide in your community?
- What risk and protective factors for suicide are found in your community?
- What lethal means are used most often? (e.g., bridges, substances, weapons)
- Under what circumstances do suicide deaths and attempts occur in your community? (e.g., problems with money, housing, food, jobs)
- Which community resources are used to identify and assist people at risk for suicide?
- What is your community doing well? Which community organizations, groups, and partners are already working to address factors that impact suicide risk and protective factors?

A key to understanding the issue of suicide in your community is [reviewing available data](#). It is also important to listen to the perspectives of those with suicide-centered lived experience because this can help you understand the personal experiences the data represents. You might consider engaging those with lived experience through listening sessions, surveys, focus groups, and/or coalition membership to help you better understand community needs and strengths.

Below are some examples of resources your coalition can use to collect quantitative data:

- [Web-based Injury Statistics and Query System \(WISQARS\)](#): Provides data on fatal and nonfatal injuries. It's a free interactive resource, open to everyone.
- [National Violent Death Reporting System \(NVDRS\) module in WISQARS](#): Provides information on violent deaths and suicides.
- State and local health departments (e.g., [Kalamazoo Health & Community Services Department Data Hub](#))
- Medical examiners or coroner's offices (e.g., [McCracken County Kentucky Office of Coroner](#))
- Health systems and hospitals (e.g., [Iverson Memorial Hospital Community Health Needs Assessment](#))



- Schools, including higher education (e.g., [San Diego Unified School District – 2025 YRBS Data and Reports](#), [University of Wisconsin Madison - 2025 Healthy Minds Survey](#))

If you have trouble finding data in your community, reach out to your local health department, medical examiner or coroner, health systems, hospitals, K-12 schools, or colleges and universities to learn what data they can share. Building these relationships helps fill data gaps and strengthens partnerships that can support suicide prevention efforts across your community.

Step 2: Choose Long-Term Goals

In Step 2, use the information you gathered in Step 1 to identify realistic, long-term goals; be sure to identify a specific group of people and a specific risk or protective factor, circumstance, or setting where you expect to see change. Start small: choosing just one or two realistic and achievable goals will allow you to make the most of your efforts and resources. Answer the following questions when choosing your long-term goals:

- How serious or dangerous is the issue of suicide in your community?
- How widespread is the issue?
- Is this issue impacting some groups more than others?
- Are there existing resources that can help address this issue?
- Do you need more information about the issue of suicide before you set a goal?

Step 3: Identify Key Risk and Protective Factors

Step 3 focuses on identifying suicide [risk and protective factors](#). These are factors that increase suicide risk (risk factors) and factors that help keep people safe and well in your community (protective factors). No single risk or protective factor can fully predict or explain suicide risk. When selecting risk and protective factors to prioritize, consider whether they can be measured using available data sources, input from people with suicide-centered lived experience, surveys, or other evaluation methods you identified in Step 1.



Risk Factors: Risk factors are situations or problems that may increase the likelihood that a person will attempt suicide. Some examples of risk factors are listed here.

- Prior suicide attempt(s)
- Mental health disorders
- Substance misuse
- Social isolation
- Lack of access to behavioral health care

Protective Factors: Protective factors are characteristics that may decrease the likelihood that a person will attempt suicide. Some examples of protective factors are listed here.

- Effective behavioral health care
- Connectedness
- Life skills
- Self-esteem and a sense of purpose or meaning in life
- Cultural, religious, or personal beliefs that discourage suicide

Step 4: Select or Develop Interventions

Before you start planning an intervention, make sure that it is likely to reduce the risk factors or promote the protective factors you selected in Step 3 and help you achieve your long-term goals. To strengthen the relevance and effectiveness of your efforts, partner with individuals who have suicide-centered lived experience when choosing or adapting interventions.

Focus on one priority risk or protective factor. Select interventions that directly address that factor and are realistic for your coalition's capabilities and resources. As a part of your evaluation plan, identify how you will know whether your efforts made a difference. What measurable data will you have?

Coalitions are encouraged to use SPRC's [Best Practices Registry \(BPR\)](#) to identify effective programs and interventions. Every program or intervention listed on the BPR has been reviewed by experts to ensure it aligns with the most current guidance on preventing suicide.



Step 5: Plan the Evaluation

Evaluation can help you determine whether your interventions are working as intended. By evaluating your efforts, you can understand what is working well, what could be improved, and whether people in your community are benefiting from your efforts. There are three main tasks when planning an evaluation:

- Meet with partners.
- Describe your activities in detail and brainstorm how you can measure progress and impact.
- Plan your evaluation design by deciding how you will measure the effectiveness of your efforts. Before you begin any activity, identify what data you will need to collect and how you will gather it.

Step 6: Implement Action, Evaluate Progress, and Improve Through Learning

In Step 6, you put your plan into action, track progress toward your goals, and share what you learn.

Process evaluation looks at whether an activity or program was carried out as planned. It also helps you identify any issues related to implementation that could influence your results and ultimately impact your ability to achieve your long-term goals.

Outcome evaluation looks at whether your activities led to the changes you hoped to see. This outcome data helps you determine what changes occurred, how these changes compare to what you expected to achieve, and how the outcomes for people who participated in your activities compare to outcomes for people who did not participate.

[Think about sustainability early.](#) Coalitions do not need to sustain every activity forever; focus on maintaining the programs, partnerships, and strategies that are making the greatest impact in your community.

Once there is documented progress toward your goals, share the results with others. When making a communication plan, consider the following:



- Who is your audience? (e.g., local policy makers, families, partnering organizations, boards, councils)
- How do others share different types of progress in your community? (e.g., council meetings, radio, local cable access, social media)
- What information will you share? (e.g., how frequently services are used, number of participants, new resources created)

SPRC Resources

A Strategic Planning Approach to Suicide Prevention: Free online course from SPRC that teaches participants how to develop, prioritize, and implement effective suicide prevention strategies using SPRC's strategic planning model.

Best Practices Registry (BPR): SPRC's searchable library of vetted suicide prevention programs and interventions. The BPR helps communities, providers, and organizations find the best program or intervention for their setting.

A Comprehensive Approach to Suicide Prevention: SPRC model that includes nine strategies that form a comprehensive approach to suicide prevention and mental health promotion.

Find Your State or Territory Suicide Prevention Contact: SPRC directory of state and territorial suicide prevention contacts and plans.

Incorporating Suicide Prevention Where We Live, Work, and Play: SPRC resource that highlights how essential needs impact suicide risk and provides ways to incorporate suicide prevention where people live, work, and play.

Keys to Success: SPRC overview of five guiding principles for effective suicide prevention, including lived experience, collaboration, safe messaging, cultural competence, and evidence-based practice.

Levels of Lived Experience Engagement in Suicide Prevention Projects: SPRC guide for organizations that engage, or plan to engage, people with lived experience in prevention efforts in a variety of fields.



Recommendations for Local Suicide Prevention Infrastructure: SPRC recommendations developed to help local settings—such as municipalities, counties, and Tribal governments—establish, improve, and sustain a strong local suicide prevention infrastructure.

Strategic Planning Approach to Suicide Prevention: SPRC framework that guides communities and organizations through a six-step, data-driven process to identify suicide prevention priorities, select effective interventions, set goals, and evaluate outcomes.

Other Resources

Community-Led Suicide Prevention Toolkit - Planning: Education Development Center resource that provides guidance for coalitions and community partners on using data-driven strategic planning to identify priorities, set goals, and implement suicide prevention plans.

Community Toolbox: Website from the Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas offering free educational modules and tools addressing community assessment, planning, intervention, evaluation, and advocacy.

Moving Suicide Prevention Upstream: From Concept to Action: This resource from the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention offers practical guidance, messaging tips, and community-driven strategies for public health professionals, suicide prevention leaders, and others working to create safe, supportive environments where people can thrive.

National Strategy for Suicide Prevention: National approach from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services outlining priorities, goals, and recommendations for a coordinated, whole society approach to reducing suicide.

Rural Minds: Website providing mental health education, fact sheets, crisis and suicide prevention resources, personal stories, webinars, and connections to support services tailored for rural communities.

Suicide Prevention Resource for Action: Center for Disease Control and Prevention's evidence-based public health framework that outlines strategies and approaches communities can use to prevent suicide.



Strategic Prevention Framework: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration framework designed to help states, territories, and communities strengthen comprehensive suicide prevention systems.

For additional resources and assistance, visit [SPRC.org](https://sprc.org)
or SPRC's [Contact Us](#) page.

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