



Office of Children and Family Services

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Informational Letter

Transmittal:	24-OCFS-INF-06
To:	Local Departments of Social Services Commissioners Voluntary Authorized Agencies Executive Directors
Issuing Division/Office:	Division of Child Welfare and Community Services
Date:	June 4, 2024
Subject:	Suicide Risk Reduction Information and Resources
Suggested Distribution:	Adoption Supervisors Child Protective Services Supervisors Child Welfare Supervisors Detention Programs Executive Directors Directors of Services Independent Living Coordinators Foster Care Supervisors Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs Staff Development Coordinators Youth Bureau Directors
Contact Person(s):	See section IV.
Attachments:	None

Filing References

Previous ADMs/INFs	Releases Cancelled	NYS Regs.	Soc. Serv. Law & Other Legal Ref.	Manual Ref.	Misc. Ref.
22-OCFS-INF-10		18 NYCRR 432.1(aa), 18 NYCRR 408.6, 18 NYCRR 428.9(c), 18 NYCRR 441.21	NYS Civil Procedure Law and Rules Article 63-A NYS Penal Law § 265.45 Chapter 371 of the Laws of 2022		NYS-OMH: Make Your Home Suicide Safer, Prevent Suicide Through Lethal Means Safety

I. Purpose

The purpose of this Informational Letter (INF) is to provide local departments of social services (LDSSs) and voluntary authorized agencies (VAs) with information and resources to help identify and reduce the risks of suicide in children and youth and to respond more effectively to families in crisis.

II. Background

Suicide prevention and firearm safety are complex issues, which can create challenges when discussing them and engaging with the populations being served. This INF is intended to help frontline staff remove barriers, by highlighting, recent trends in the cause of death of children and youth, changes to gun laws in New York State, and provide insight and tools to more effectively engage with families to improve safety and reduce risk.

- Firearm-related injuries became the leading cause of death for children and youth in the United States in 2020. In 2021, approximately 30% of these deaths were due to suicide by a firearm.¹ In 2019, 19% of high school students seriously considered attempting suicide during the past year.² Access to firearms by those who are suicidal is extremely dangerous. Research indicates nearly half of attempts take place within 10 minutes after the first thought of suicide,³ and suicide attempts involving a firearm are fatal 91% of the time.⁴
- In July 2022, Governor Kathy Hochul signed a new law (Chapter 371 of the Laws of 2022) that creates additional requirements for firearms to be secured and not left accessible to children and youth. Failure to secure firearms from children and youth is now a class A misdemeanor in New York State. The law regarding safe storage can be found here: [NYS Penal Law § 265.45](#).
- In August 2019, New York State law established Extreme Risk Protection Orders (or Red Flag Laws) that give the police, district attorney, family members, household members, school officials, and medical professionals the ability to petition in court to have firearms temporarily removed from a home and stop new guns from being purchased. For more information on this process go to <https://ww2.nycourts.gov/erpo>.

III. Program Implications

Identifying Risk of Suicide

This section provides information to identify risks of suicide, tools to reduce the risk of suicide, and resources to support this critical work.

Increased Risk of Suicide

Many factors contribute to an increased risk of suicide, and among them are historical trauma or discrimination.⁵ Some examples are:

- One study found that women who are victims of domestic abuse are three times more likely than their peers to attempt suicide.⁶
- In a 2023 survey by the Trevor Project, 46% of LGBTQ youth seriously considered suicide within the past year, with 17% of those surveyed having attempted suicide.⁷

¹ Roberts, B; Nofi, C; Cornell, C; Kapoor, S; Harrison, L; Sathya, C. (August 21, 2023). "Trends and Disparities in Firearm Deaths Among Children," *American Academy of Pediatrics*. [Trends and Disparities in Firearm Deaths Among Children | Pediatrics | American Academy of Pediatrics \(aap.org\)](#).

² *Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report 2009-2019*. Center for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/YRBSDataSummaryTrendsReport2019-508.pdf>.

³ Deisenhammer, E; Ing, C; Strauss, R; Kemmler, G; Hinterhuber, H; Weiss, E. (January 2009). "The duration of the suicidal process: how much time is left for intervention between consideration and accomplishment of a suicide attempt?," *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*. [The duration of the suicidal process: how much time is left for intervention between consideration and accomplishment of a suicide attempt? – PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#).

⁴ Miller, M; Azrael, D; Hemenway, D. (June 2004). "The epidemiology of case fatality rates for suicide in the northeast," *Annals of Emergency Medicine*. [The epidemiology of case fatality rates for suicide in the northeast - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#).

⁵ *Risk and Protective Factors*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/factors/index.html>.

⁶ Campbell, D., "Women who suffer domestic abuse three times as likely to attempt suicide." (February 22, 2023). *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/feb/22/women-who-suffer-domestic-abuse-three-times-as-likely-to-attempt-suicide>.

⁷ *2023 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ Young People*. The Trevor Project. <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2023/>.

- Since 2017, suicide among Black youth has risen faster than any other racial/ethnic group, and early adolescent Black youth are twice as likely to die from suicide than their white counterparts.⁸
- Thirty-three percent (33%) of youth who ran away and experienced homelessness attempted suicide in the previous year.⁹

Heightened Risk of Suicide

Having an awareness of persons at heightened risk for suicide is important when assessing safety and risk of children and youth. It is important to note that youth at heightened risk for suicide are not necessarily suicidal or will become suicidal. Youth at heightened risk for suicide include individuals who

- currently have suicidal thoughts,
- have attempted suicide in the past and are currently in distress,
- are struggling with their mental health **and** are experiencing a painful life crisis, and/or
- are struggling with substance misuse **and** are experiencing a painful life crisis.¹⁰

Warning Signs of Suicide

There are a variety of warning signs to look for in children and youth to identify if they are suicidal or at risk of becoming suicidal. To identify warning signs of suicide in children and youth, look for the **FACTS**:¹¹

- **Feelings** – Expressing hopelessness about the future.
- **Actions** – Displaying severe/overwhelming pain or distress.
- **Changes** – Showing worrisome behavioral cues or marked changes in behavior, including withdrawal from friends or changes in social activities; anger or hostility; or changes in sleep.
- **Threats** – Talking about, writing about, or making plans for suicide.
- **Situations** – Experiencing stressful situations including those that involve loss or change, create personal humiliation, or involve problems at home, in school, or with law enforcement. These are some of the situations that can serve as triggers for suicide.

Responding to Heightened Risk of Suicide

When a child welfare caseworker determines that there is a heightened risk for suicide, they should ask directly if there are suicidal thoughts, behaviors, or plans. When children and youth are suicidal or are having suicidal thoughts, they should be immediately referred to a trained mental health professional for an evaluation, safety planning intervention, and treatment. Calling or texting 988 for the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is the fastest way for someone in crisis to get connected with services. Texting “Got5” to 741-741 is another option to connect with a call center in your area to get referrals for services through the Crisis Text Line. In addition, emergency rooms and mobile crisis units are available to respond to children or youth in crisis.

Reducing Risk of Suicide

Counseling on Access to Lethal Means (CALM) is an evidence-based approach that can be used when a child or youth is at heightened risk for suicide to reduce their access to objects that can be used in a suicide attempt. This approach helps identify the potentially lethal objects and discusses measures a family and/or community can take to reduce access to these objects while there is a heightened risk of suicide. Potentially lethal objects include firearms, medications, illicit drugs, and sharp objects. **Putting**

⁸ AACAP Policy Statement on Increased Suicide Among Black Youth in the U.S. *American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*. https://www.aacap.org/aacap/Policy_Statements/2022/AACAP_Policy_Statement_Increased_Suicide_Among_Black_Youth_US.aspx.

⁹ Gerwitz O'Brein, J; Edinburgh, L; Barnes, A; McRee, A. (April 2020). "Mental Health Outcomes Among Homeless Runaway, and Stably Housed Youth," *Pediatrics*. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32152134/>.

¹⁰ "Counseling on Access to Lethal Means." Zero Suicide. <https://zerosuicidetraining.edc.org/enrol/index.php?id=20>.

¹¹ "Worried About Suicide? Learn the Facts," *Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide*. [FACTS-Green.pdf \(sptsusa.org\)](https://www.sptsusa.org/FACTS-Green.pdf).

time and distance between children or youth experiencing suicidal thoughts and lethal means can save lives.

There are no special qualifications or license required to conduct CALM. Rather it is a commonsense approach that anyone can take to reduce the risk of suicide. CALM can be used by caseworkers **in addition to and not instead of** services provided by trained mental health professionals. In a situation when a child or youth is in treatment or on a waiting list for treatment, many caseworkers, and voluntary staff may have an opportunity to be in the home and have the ability to incorporate lethal-means counseling with a family to increase safety and support for better outcomes. See Training under Resources below to access the CALM training.

When engaging with a family where a child or youth is at heightened risk of suicide, it is important to collaborate with other service providers to determine if a safety plan has already been made or if one needs to be made. To counsel on access to lethal means, everyone in the household should be engaged at some level. Respectful and direct questions should be asked about firearms, medications, and other potentially lethal objects in the home.

Studies have shown that discussing suicide or access to lethal means does not lead to having new contemplations of suicide or increase the risk of a suicide attempt.¹² When a firearm has been identified as being in the home of a child or youth at risk of suicide, the most effective way to reduce access to the lethal means is for the owner to remove it from the home. If this option is not feasible, the gun should be separated from the ammunition, and both should be locked in a secure storage container (see Gun Locks below in References). This also applies when addressing access to controlled substance medications, illicit drugs, and/or sharp objects. Having the caregiver remove the objects from the home is the best option, followed by secure storage of the objects, which limits the access by the at-risk child or youth. To increase the effectiveness of counseling on access to lethal means, it is important to make a plan that is practical, set goals that can be accomplished, and follow up to confirm that the plan is being followed.

Refusal to Safety Plan

An engaged family can be empowered with this information to significantly lower the risk of suicide in the home. However, refusal by the caregiver to be involved in a safety plan or to reduce access to lethal means increases the risk of suicide in the home. When a child or youth is at heightened risk of suicide and the caregiver is unwilling to engage in safety planning, including reducing access to lethal means, work with your supervisor to explore additional safety interventions that may need to be taken, which may include making a report of suspected child abuse or maltreatment to the Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment. For more information on mandated reporting visit <https://ocfs.ny.gov/programs/cps/>.

Resources

Training - An evidence-based, free, self-paced training on counseling on access to lethal means suitable for (non-clinical) child welfare workers is available from the Zero Suicide website at [Counseling on Access to Lethal Means \(edc.org\)](https://www.edc.org/). A certificate of completion is provided after the two-hour training and passing a brief post-training test. All child welfare workers are strongly encouraged to take the CALM training.

Gun Locks - Gun locks can often be obtained free of charge from many law enforcement agencies. Project Child Safe maintains a list of gun lock resources statewide. Details can be found at [Get a Safety Kit - Project ChildSafe](https://www.projectchildsafe.org/). In addition, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services is supporting child welfare caseworkers by purchasing and distributing gun locks to each LDSS and

¹² Dazzi, T; Gribble, R; Wessely, S; Fear, N.T. "Does asking about suicide and related behaviors induce suicidal ideation? What is the evidence? (July 7, 2014)". *Cambridge University Press*. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/psychological-medicine/article/does-asking-about-suicide-and-related-behaviours-induce-suicidal-ideation-what-is-the-evidence/FCAEE9E5BC840D76CF10AEBECD921AC9>.

authorized VA statewide. These items will be distributed free of charge to LDSSs and authorized VAs that distribute this policy document to their child welfare caseworkers and have them take the Zero Suicide CALM training. A letter will be sent to each LDSS and authorized VA statewide within 30 days from the release of this policy with details on requesting gun locks.

Brochures - The New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH) has developed a brochure that can be given to families and utilized by service providers to reduce the risk of suicide through lethal means. It highlights what items in a home can be potentially lethal, provides resources for families in crisis, and gives important warning signs to look for to determine if someone may be suicidal. This document can be found at: [Make Your Home Suicide Safer \(preventsuicideny.org\)](https://preventsuicideny.org).

IV. Contacts

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