ESD 105 START HANDBOOK

(S)CHOOL(T)RAUMA (A)SSESSMENTAND (R)ESPONSE (T)EAM

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ESD 105 School Trauma Assessment and Response Team Handbook Updated May 2026

Table of Contents

How to use this Handbook
- Purpose of this handbook
- Using the handbook during a reponse
- How the handbook and one-pagers work together

Introduction

Postvention in Schools
- What is Postvention?
- Schools Role in Postvention

Team Formation and Roles - District/School
- Roles and Responsibilities of District/School Team

Team Formation and Roles-ESD 105 START Response
- Roles and Responsibilities of ESD 105 START

Safe Messaging
- Social Media
- Curriculum Adjustments

Addressing Cultural Diversity

Steps in Postvention
- Initial Confirmation
- District/School Lead 1-pager
- Identifying Students of Concern

Care Stations
- Key Considerations
- Example Care Station Activities

Community Debrief and Response
- School Response Team Debrief
- ESD 105 START Debrief
- Funerals and Memorial Services
- School Memorials and Tributes

Sources Cited
- Additional Resources
- Resources from Specific Organizations

Templates, Toolkits and Guidelines

Resources for Memorials

Crisis Services

Services Specific for Schools

Grief Support Services

HOW TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

This handbook is designed to provide a comprehensive overview of postvention in schools, including the purpose of postvention, best-practice guidance, and the roles schools and ESD 105 may play in supporting a response.
This document is intended to support:

- School and district leadership
- School-based staff
- ESD 105 staff
- Community partners

Purpose of This Handbook

The handbook is a planning, training, and reference tool. It outlines:

- What postvention is and why it matters
- Best practices for safe, structured, and supportive responses
- The roles and responsibilities of school and ESD 105 START teams
- Key considerations for communication, student support, and recovery

Using This Handbook During a Response

During an active response, staff should not rely on this handbook alone. Instead, staff should use the role-specific one-pagers as quick-reference tools to guide implementation. These one-pagers provide:

- Step-by-step actions
- Role-specific responsibilities
- Time-based guidance (e.g., Day 1, Days 2–5)
- Critical reminders to ensure key steps are not missed

How the Handbook and One-Pagers Work Together

- Handbook → Explains the why, what, and best practices
- One-Pagers → Provide the how and what to do right now

Throughout this handbook, you will see references to the corresponding one-pagers. These are intended to support real-time decision-making and implementation during a postvention response.

INTRODUCTION

Objective: To create a comprehensive guide that organizes available resources about how to respond to a death in a school/district that can be individualized by school or district. This guide is also meant to clarify the role of ESD 105 and its (S)chool (T)rauma (A)ssessment and (R)esponse (T)eam (START) members.

The goal is not to recreate a comprehensive resource, but to pull the best resources from the materials that already exist and provide resources to enhance a school's ability to respond with resources specific to their distinct ESD.

POSTVENTION IN SCHOOLS

The grief associated with a death can be quite overwhelming. When a school community experiences a death the effects can be felt on various levels. Using protocols that follow model guidance and knowing where to turn for help is critical. Death can be sudden and unexpected, leaving survivors unprepared and looking for answers as to why this person is dead. This guide includes information, directions and resources to help prepare and support your school/district as they navigate this event.

In a perfect world:

- School resources would be in place before a death occurs
- Community partners would be identified and trained
- Postvention procedures would be reviewed regularly
- The school and/or district crisis team would have practiced responding to postvention situations

Postvention refers to organized immediate and short-term responses in the aftermath of a death that are designed to contain the impact of the death, maintain safety, and stabilize the school community while also supporting the appropriate expression of grief. The primary goals of postvention are to help the school/district effectively manage the situation, provide opportunities for grief support, maintain an environment focused on typical education activities, and to help students, staff, and the school community cope with their feelings.

What is Postvention?

An organized response in the aftermath of a death that:

- Provides opportunities to start healing from the grief and distress of a death. These healing activities can mitigate future risks and other negative effects
- Recognizes that death is a form of trauma exposure
- Ensures that individuals/families who have experienced a death are offered support and a path to recovery

Why are postvention protocols needed? Postvention provides:

- Space for grieving
- Care for those experiencing grief
- Identification and protection for others at risk
- Postvention protocols ensure consistency in response no matter the cause of death, and should codify procedure in school policy

All deaths, regardless of cause, should be addressed using the same postvention protocols to reduce risk of contagion and ensure consistent, safe responses.

School's Role in Postvention

Effective postvention responses are grounded in three key principles:

- Maintain **structure**/order of the school routine
  - Remembering structure alleviates chaos
  - Including strategies that focus on all components of the competent school community
- Provide **support** and resources to the school community
  - Manage reactions to the death with developmentally appropriate supportive interventions
  - Providing both permission and opportunity to talk about feelings
- Demonstrate **control** of the situation within the school/district
  - Using formal versus informal communication
  - Providing information and direction to faculty, admin, and all other staff

These principles guide all decisions during a postvention response and help create a safe, stable environment for recovery. Proper postvention helps the school community process a death more safely, mitigating:

- Feelings of blame, responsibility, betrayal, and potential staff burnout Complicated grief/loss, both in the short and long term
- Risk potential for cluster/copycat deaths
- Difficulty focusing on academics and other activities

Postvention not only responds to a death, but it is also a critical prevention tool. Schools should use best practice guidelines that include the following in their postvention planning:

- Crisis response
- Helping students cope
- Involving parents
- Model language for notifications
- Working with community/media
- Safe messaging
- Safe ways to remember the person (Memorialization)
- Addressing needs when school is not in session

Your district can use the Lifelines Readiness Survey Tool to help decide where you are at in this process.

TEAM FORMATION AND ROLES- DISTRICT/SCHOOLS

A response team is an identified set of individuals that will implement the school plan in the event of a death and/or tragic event. They will also be responsible for determining the longer-term needs in the aftermath of the death and assisting in the development of a plan to address those needs. It is best to identify and prepare the response team proactively so that they are ready with the proper resources already in place to respond to an event before one occurs. The response team is often composed of school administrators and leadership, school nurses, mental health providers, resource officers, and/or IT.

Roles and Responsibilities

- **Team Leader/Coordinator:** This person is essentially the project and team manager. They make team assignments and schedules; collects relevant data; leads meetings; functions as liaison to school administration. They should remain the consistent and central point of contact throughout the response.
- **Information Coordinator:** Gathers information about the deceased, family, friends etc; determines the evolving level of student information exposure; monitors media coverage, and social media.
- **Parent/Guardian Liaison:** Responds to parent/guardian inquiries; develop parent/guardian materials; assist in setting up parent/guardian meetings if necessary. This person may also be in charge of communicating with the family of the deceased.
- **Administrative Liaison:** Manages the removal of student belongings; distributes information (ie scripts) to staff; coordinates the logistics of the staffing and protocol for care stations.
- **Community Liaison:** Informs relevant agencies of the school's plans; arranges volunteers and support from local mental health resources as necessary.
- **Operations Coordinator:** Addresses all issues that affect the physical school building i.e. for any meetings, transportation, or coordinates law enforcement if needed.
- **Faculty Support Staff:** At least two members who follow the daily schedule of the deceased and siblings who can also provide support to faculty.
- **Crisis Assessment of Vulnerable Students Team:** Two or more members of the team who can coordinate crisis contacts for vulnerable students.

Quick Reference:
For a step-by-step checklist of District/School responsibilities during a response, see:

- District/School Lead Table
- District/School Lead 1-Pager
- Lifelines Responsibilities of Crisis Team Members

TEAM FORMATION AND ROLES-ESD 105 START RESPONSE

The ESD 105 (S)chool (T)rauma (A)ssessment and (R)esponse (T)eam (START) is an identified set of individuals that will assist in implementing a school response plan in the event of a tragic incident or death. The role of the team is to provide whatever supports the district/school is in need of in the aftermath of a tragic incident or death. ESD 105 START can assist with coordination of resources among school staff and outside agencies. They can partner with districts/schools to determine if there are longer-term needs in the aftermath of the death and assist in the development of a plan to address those needs. ESD 105 START are often composed of Student Support personnel familiar with school aged children, trauma responses and social emotional learning. The Student Support Director is the person that can initiate a START response.

Roles and Responsibilities

- **Student Support Director:** After the Student Support Director connects with the district to gauge necessary support and determine response arrival time, the Student Support Director will determine if they are leading the response or if they will designate a Lead. The Student Support Director contacts START members informing them that a START response needs to be initiated; indicating the arrival time and who will be Leading. The Student Support Director will contact the Behavioral Health Program Manager to coordinate clinician response. The Behavioral Health Program Manager will communicate details of which clinicians can respond with Student Support Director and/or Lead
- **START Lead:** The role of the Lead on START is to communicate with START members that a response is needed. Once the team is assembled, the Lead will remain in contact with the Student Support Director regarding status and any additional needs that may arise. The Lead will contact the Student Support Director at the end of the school day with a brief debrief of the day and plans for the following school day.
- **START Response Members:** START Response members provide coordinated crisis support to students, staff, and school communities in collaboration with district and school teams. When requested, ESD 105 staff support districts by sharing best practices for preparation, response, and follow-up during critical incidents. Specific responsibilities are assigned by the ESD 105 Student Support Director or START Lead and may vary depending on the needs of the district or school.
- **Staff located at Impacted Districts/Schools:** If you are an ESD 105 employee whose location is at a district/school that has experienced a tragic event or death, contact your direct supervisor to verify they are aware of the incident. Upon arrival to your school the following day, contact the START Lead as soon as possible. Based on need, you may be asked to report to the site that has been most impacted by the incident. If this is the case, the START response is the priority. All other commitments must be rescheduled as soon as it is possible to do so. If this is not possible, contact the Lead to explore alternative options.

Quick Reference:

For step-by-step guidance on START deployment and response roles, see:

- START Lead 1-Pager
- START Member 1-Pager

SAFE MESSAGING

Talking about death is critical and we have a responsibility to balance being truthful with the school community and the need to be sensitive to the family. If the death was the result of suicide, drug overdose or another form that the family is not willing to share, consider the following:

- If the family does NOT wish to permit disclosure:
  - "*The family has requested that information about the cause of death not be shared at this time*".
- Use this opportunity to talk about the phenomenon of suicide/drug overdose, etc:
  - "*We know there has been a lot of talk about whether this was a suicide/drug overdose death. Since the subject has been raised, we want to take this opportunity to give you accurate information about suicide/drug overdose in general, ways to prevent it, and how to get help if you or someone you know is struggling*".

Talk should center around the fact that the school has experienced the death of a valuable member of its school community, not on the circumstances of the death. Talk about the person in a balanced manner. Don't be afraid to include struggles that were known - especially in individual conversations about the death. If the student's struggles are not mentioned, it can cause confusion and give the impression that suicide/drug use/abuse is an effective way of addressing one's distress - especially among the other students. Always follow best practice guidelines, including:

- Use written communication as the primary method whenever possible
- Limit details and avoid speculation or graphic descriptions
- Use compassionate, neutral language and avoid sensationalizing the death
- Sample Announcements for Students and Staff after a Death (pdf)
- Sample Media Template (Forced Copy)
- Sample Day Before- Emergency Staff meeting statement template (Forced Copy)
- Sample stand up meeting statement (Forced Copy)

Social Media

- Use school website to promote resources and education
- Proactively educate students about unreliability of internet
- Engage students in monitoring social media and remind students to take concerning messages from peers online as seriously as they would take them in person and to make referrals
- Expect that there will be community posts that may scapegoat the school or contain inaccurate information. Do not engage with these online or through community emails or letters
- As a crisis team, take a break from social media entirely
- Remind faculty and staff about district policies and protocols about social media

Curriculum Adjustments

Students and staff may be more vulnerable to distress after a death. Content that includes themes of death, suicide, violence, loss, or risk-taking behaviors can intensify emotional reactions, increase anxiety, or contribute to rumination. Adjusting instruction during this time may support the school's role in providing structure, safety, and predictability while minimizing additional emotional strain. However curriculum changes do not need to be made unless the school determines there is a need. If curriculum changes are made, consider the following:

Goal: to reduce harm while maintaining learning

- Temporarily review and modify content
  - Duration should be based on level of impact and observed student needs (recommended one week or less)
  - Gradual return to typical curriculum is recommended
- Prioritize structure and routine
- Avoid completely unstructured time or over-processing the event in academic classes
- Be transparent with students
- Classroom discussions about death should remain brief, supported, and redirected to appropriate spaces (care stations, counselors)
- Provide flexibility
- Shift focus when possible (emphasize coping skills)
- Coordinate across staff

ADDRESSING CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Postvention efforts need to take into consideration the cultural diversity of everyone affected by a death, including the family, school, and community. This diversity may include differences in race, ethnicity, language, religion, sexual orientation, and disability. Culture may significantly affect the way people view and respond to death. Key points involving cultural differences include the following:

- Be aware that the extent to which people can talk about death varies greatly
- Be sensitive to the beliefs and customs regarding the family and community, including rituals, funerals, the appropriate person to contact, etc.
- Be sensitive to how the family or community may need to respond to the death before individuals outside of the family or community intervene to provide support
- Engage a "cultural broker" to act as a liaison between the family, community, and school if key members of school staff are not from the same racial, ethnic, or religious group as the person who died
- Bring in interpreters and translators if there are language differences. If possible, have resource materials in different languages

STEPS IN POSTVENTION

Important:
This section outlines best-practice considerations for each phase of postvention. During an active response, staff should use the role-specific one-pagers for step-by-step implementation guidance.

Initial Confirmation

Lifelines Crisis Team Checklist

The initial confirmation phase is critical in establishing an accurate, coordinated, and safe response. Actions taken during this phase set the tone for communication, trust, and the overall effectiveness of the postvention process.

Key Considerations

- **Verify information before acting**. All communication and response efforts should be based on confirmed, reliable information. Misinformation at this stage can increase distress and undermine trust.
- **Prioritize compassionate and coordinated communication with the family.** Schools should establish a single point of contact to communicate with the family. This helps ensure clarity, consistency, and respect for the family's wishes, particularly regarding what information may be shared.
- **Align response level to the level of impact.** School and district leadership should determine the level of response needed (building, district, or ESD 105 START support) based on the scope and impact of the incident.
- **Ensure internal coordination before broad communication.** Staff who are most directly impacted should be informed in a timely and supportive manner before wider communication occurs.
- **Prepare for structured communication.** Schools should develop clear, consistent messaging that aligns with best-practice guidance and the family's wishes. Written communication is preferred whenever possible.
- **Activate the response team with clarity of roles.** Response teams should be activated with clearly defined roles to support coordination, communication, and student support efforts.

Quick Reference:

For a step-by-step checklist of initial response actions, see:

- District/School Lead 1-Pager

Identifying Students of Concern

Following a death, some students may be at increased risk for emotional distress, crisis response, or difficulty functioning in the school setting. Early identification allows schools to provide timely, targeted support and reduce the risk of more serious outcomes. Not all students will respond to a loss in the same way. Some may show immediate signs of distress, while others may appear unaffected initially and experience delayed reactions over time.

Key Considerations

- **Identification is an ongoing process.** Students of concern may be identified on Day 1 or emerge in the days or weeks following the event. Staff should continue to monitor and share concerns over time.
- **Behavioral changes are often more important than stated feelings.** Students may not verbalize distress directly. Changes in behavior, mood, attendance, or engagement may be indicators of need.
- **Connection to the deceased increases risk, but is not the only factor.** While close relationships are important to consider, students with prior vulnerabilities or similar experiences may also be significantly impacted.
- **Staff collaboration is critical.** No single staff member will have a complete picture. Sharing observations across teachers, counselors, and support staff helps ensure students do not go unnoticed.
- **Support should be matched to level of need.** Some students may benefit from brief check-ins, while others may require more intensive support, safety planning, or referral to outside services.

Students Who May Require Additional Support

- Were close friends, siblings, or had a romantic relationship with the deceased
- Have a known history of mental health concerns, including depression, anxiety, or prior suicidal ideation
- Have a history of substance use or risk-taking behaviors
- Shared classes, activities, or significant time with the deceased (e.g., athletics, clubs, church)
- Have experienced a previous loss or trauma
- Are new to the school or for whom limited background information is available
- Express feelings of guilt, responsibility, or unresolved conflict related to the deceased
- Are identified by peers, staff, or family members as struggling

Signs That a Student May Need Immediate Attention

- Expresses thoughts of wanting to die or harm themselves
- Shows significant withdrawal, isolation, or inability to function in class
- Demonstrates intense emotional distress (e.g., panic, rage, hopelessness)
- Engages in risky or self-destructive behaviors
- Has a sudden and noticeable change in behavior or appearance

Quick Reference:

Recognizing Signs of Distress

Students identified as needing support may be referred to care stations, school-based mental health staff, or additional services depending on level of need.

CARE STATIONS

Care stations are structured, time-limited supports designed to provide immediate stabilization, validation, and identification of students who may need additional follow-up support.

Key Considerations

- **Focus on stabilization, not therapy.** Care stations structured, time-limited and not a substitute for ongoing counseling. Their purpose is to provide short-term support, stabilization, validation, and identify students who may need additional services
- **Maintain structure and supervision.** Care stations should be staffed by trained personnel and operate within a clear structure, including sign-in and sign-out procedures
- **Limit group size and duration.** Smaller groups and structured activities help ensure students receive appropriate support without becoming overwhelmed.
- **Plan for transition and closure**. Care stations are typically temporary (>2 days). Schools should plan to announce closure one day in advance and ensure students are connected to longer-term supports as needed

Care Station Example Agenda
Tasks of Mourning

Example Care Station Activities

- When I heard the news (English/Spanish)
- A Favorite Day we Had (English/Spanish)
- Grief Creature (English/Spanish)
- Finish the Sentences (English/Spanish)
- What I Know (English/Spanish)
- Remembrance Flower (English/Spanish)
- Goodbye Letter (English/Spanish)
- Grief Sentence Completion (English/Spanish)
- Grief Fact Sheet (English/Spanish)

COMMUNITY DEBRIEF AND RESPONSE

Large community meetings are generally not recommended. Schools should prioritize controlled, small-group or written communication to reduce risk of contagion and misinformation.

- **Lifelines does not recommend this practice in postvention**

School Response Team Debrief

- Debrief is essential for Response Teams as well; it allows for important process and procedural refinement and allows the team members to identify limitations to their ability to respond
  - Time at the end of each day should be made to debrief, document and process. This is taxing work, and this provides an opportunity for the team to care for itself
  - A team meeting should also be scheduled once the immediate need to respond has passed. This provides opportunities to discuss the lessons learned and opportunities for change
  - In especially complex situations, schools may call on local or national organizations to support their crisis response.

ESD 105 START Debrief

- Debrief is essential for the START Members as well. This allows for important procedural refinement and allows the team members to identify limitations or challenges to their ability to respond. This will be scheduled by the LEAD at the conclusion of a response.
- Time at the end of each day should be made to debrief, document and process. This is taxing work, and this provides an opportunity for the team to care for itself
  - A team meeting should also be scheduled once the immediate need to respond has passed. This can either happen at the school site or at the ESD.

Funerals and Memorial Services

Schools can share information about funeral and memorial services with students, families, and staff. This should be done in a consistent manner, no matter the cause of death. Best practice in postvention suggests the following when considering funerals and memorial services after a death:

- Services should not be held on school grounds. Instead, the school should focus on maintaining a regular schedule, structure, and routine. If services are held during school hours:
  - Students should be permitted to leave school to attend the service only with appropriate parent/guardian/family permission
  - Transportation should not be provided by the school
  - The school principal or senior administrator should attend the services
  - Families should be encouraged to attend the services with their student(s). This supports family involvement in the grieving process, including: the family's ability to monitor their student's response, opening for discussion as a family, and to remind their children that support is available if needed.

School Memorials and Tributes

When a student's death is experienced by a school, there often is a request for some kind of a memorial to remember or commemorate the loss. This handout highlights and addresses some key points for your memorial committee to consider when your school is faced with the challenge of designing a memorial following an incident.

Types of Memorials:

- Spontaneous – Can't be avoided, make plans to control them. Offer 'memory book' in guidance office for students to write in; retrieve all items and give to the family. Be aware that they will occur sometimes at anniversaries, birthdays, graduation, etc.
- Permanent - You would prefer to avoid, when you can't, creatively address suggestions. Avoid making quick decisions; consider scholarships, etc. that reflect positive characteristics of deceased, e.g., resilience, fortitude, team spirit
- Tributes – Such as armbands on teams, tshirts, moments of silence, empty chairs etc are ideally avoided. If you're going to have them, remember Support, Control and Structure

Guidelines:

- Must be the same regardless of death circumstance
- Consider the re-traumatization potential
- Consider the needs of the whole school community, not only those of the closest cohort of the deceased
- Understand the desire by some for action as a way to regain the feeling of control and know that decisions do not need to be made in the initial moments of a crisis

Graduation and Yearbooks:

- Follow established formula for yearbook pictures-include deceased and school accomplishments and NOT cause of death
- Follow standard policy for parent/guardian purchase of personal tribute page
- Do not leave empty seat/s for deceased in graduation ceremony
- Offer to host private ceremony for parents to present diploma
- Consider inviting peers close to deceased to group meeting hosted by counselor to discuss personal remembrances of deceased peer
- Consider including in graduation program list of all students who started academic journey with this class [e.g. 9-12th grade] and include those who moved, changed schools, etc. Include deceased students in this list

Remember:

- Keeping the focus on the needs of the entire population of living students rather
- than on just the cohort that surrounded the deceased may upset some school constituents - be prepared and be sympathetic
- Remember, contagion, clusters and copycat suicides are real and can follow a death under any circumstances - not just a death by suicide
- Reaching out to close friends of the deceased prior to the death anniversary to focus on the ways in which the deceased has impacted their lives can be a positive form of remembering and healing

SOURCES CITED

This manual was developed using the OSPI Suicide Postvention Guide for Schools in Washington State (2021), Martin Mueller Assistant Superintendent of Student Engagement and Support, Prepared by Ann Gray, OSPI Behavioral Health and Suicide Prevention Program Specialist and Megan Reibel, Forefront Suicide Prevention, UW as both a template and a source of best practice.

Additional Resources

The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement provides supports for schools across the country. This flyer provides information about the services offered by the NCSCB. You will also find a range of free print resources on the NCSCB website. The NCSCB coordinates the Coalition to Support Grieving Students which has a separate website that houses over 20 free video-based modules addressing a range of topics related to supporting grieving students, as well as free print material. National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement. (n.d.) Guidelines for responding to the death (pdf) of a student or school staff. The National Center for School Crisis & Bereavement (NCSCB) also provides free immediate technical assistance and training to schools and communities that are responding to crises, with a focus on supporting students, both short-term and throughout long-term recovery. 24-hour help is available. 1-877-536-2722 | helpnow@schoolcrisiscenter.org

Behavioral Health Navigator Contact List

- For a list of current Behavioral Health Navigator contact information please visit the OSPI Youth Suicide Prevention, Intervention, and Postvention Webpage

Resources from Specific Organizations

- Suicide Prevention Resource Center's (SPRC)
  - After a Suicide: A toolkit for schools (2nd edition)
  - University of Washington Forefront Suicide Prevention in Schools
  - Forefront Postvention Guide
  - Forefront's List of Resources in the Aftermath of Suicide and other deaths includes Seattle area resources and national resources for support as well as links to further resources
  - Forefront's Postvention: Community Debrief PPT oriented for teachers/staff
  - Forefront's Talking Tips for the Classroom: talking points following a suicide for staff
- National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)
- NASP School Safety and Crisis Response Committee's Recovery From Large-Scale Crises: Guidelines for School Administrators and Crisis Teams (2018)

TEMPLATES, TOOLKITS, AND GUIDELINES

- NCSCB's Sample Letter Templates for Notification
- Recovery from Large-Scale Crises: Guidelines for Crisis Teams and Administrators
- Responding to Grief, Trauma, and Distress After a Suicide: U.S. National Guidelines from Survivors of Suicide Loss Task Force (2015). Presents national guidelines, overview of research, and strategic goals.

RESOURCES FOR MEMORIALS

- A Brief Guide to School-Related Memorials
- Commemoration and Memorialization Guidance

CRISIS SERVICES

- Crisis Text Line , Text HOME to 741741 1-877-968-8491, 24 hours / 7 days a week
- Teen Line, 800-852-8336, Text: TEEN to 839863
- TransLifeline, 1-877-565-8860, 24 hours / 7 days a week
- 988

SERVICES SPECIFIC FOR SCHOOLS

- Forefront Suicide Prevention
  - A center dedicated to advocacy, training and empowering individuals, schools and communities in creating systemic change leading to sustainability and restoring hope.
- Crisis Connections
  - Offers programs/groups to help survivors navigate complicated grief due to a suicide loss
- Eluna Resource Center / Explaining Suicide to Children Supporting children/families impacted by grief/addiction.
- Trevor Lifeline, 1-866-488-7386, 24 hours / 7 days a week
  - Now we're building a safer, more inclusive world. LGBTQ+ young people are four times more likely to attempt suicide, and suicide remains the second leading cause of death among all young people in the U.S.

GRIEF SUPPORT SERVICES

- Washington Department of Health Grief Support and Resources
- Bridges Center for Grieving Children Supporting families of children 4–18
- Safe Crossings
  - Dedicated to helping children grieve and thrive