



**American  
Foundation  
for Suicide  
Prevention**

To: House Health Care Committee

From: The Vermont Suicide Prevention Center (VTSPC) & The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention - Vermont (AFSP)

Date: February 15, 2022

Re: Suicide Prevention

Suicide is a leading public health problem in Vermont and the 8th leading cause of death in the state. Vermont ranks 21st highest in the nation for rates of suicide with an average of 2-3 residents lost to suicide every week with 82% of suicide deaths occurring in rural communities. The Vermont Department of Health has reported a higher amount of suicide deaths in 2021 than seen in 2020. The rate of Poisoning was 2 times higher than previous years in 2021, and firearm suicide deaths remain high, though consistent with previous years.

Suicide, while mostly preventable, remains a public health problem throughout the state. Comprehensive, well-coordinated suicide prevention activities are required to identify those at risk, educate community members and professionals to intervene in a timely way, and create systems in schools, colleges, health care, and community provider services for effective prevention and postvention.

To effectively reduce suicide deaths in in the state, VTSPC and AFSP request the following budget adjustments:

**988 Crisis Line - \$1,350,000 million with creation of a designated trust fund to continue funding indefinitely**

With the statewide introduction of the 24-hour 988 Crisis Line there is a calculated expected increase in the use of the state's crisis Lifeline Call Centers. This call center volume increase will require additional staffing and training to meet the needs of those in crisis. Current Lifeline Call Centers in Vermont face staffing shortages and funding issues and cannot meet the needs of all in crisis. To operate and maintain the statewide 988 Crisis Line and wrap around services a 988 Crisis Response Commission and designated trust fund will be created to execute a funding mechanism and to oversee the adequate delivery of services.

**VTSPC and AFSP are asking for a budget adjustment of \$940,000 added to the current recommendation of \$440,000 and the creation of a designated 988 Crisis Line trust fund in order to meet the demands of the crisis line annual call volume.**

**Zero Suicide Program Expansion - \$1,200,000**

This funding will allow for the expansion of the Vermont Suicide Prevention Center's Zero Suicide program. The program will continue to engage a statewide coalition with broad public and private sector

representation and build coalition partner capacity to assist in suicide prevention planning and evaluation throughout the state.

To further the reach of the program, Zero Suicide will be expanded to ten Designated Agencies (DAs), two Specialized Service Agencies (SSAs), and Preferred Providers in the state, including expansion to primary care practices. The funding of this program allows for continuity of care for those experiencing mental health crisis and suicidal ideation by training health care staff and bridging gaps within the system.

Suicide prevention training, with a focus on cultural considerations, must be expanded throughout all Vermont communities. This includes Gatekeeper, comprehensive suicide prevention and postvention protocol training. There is a need for public education and messaging, throughout the state, to reduce stigma about mental health and help seeking.

**VTSPC and AFSP are asking for a budget adjustment of \$825,000 added to the current recommendation of \$260,000 in order to continue to expand the Zero Suicide Program to meet the needs of Vermont residents in crisis.**

#### **Statewide Director for Suicide Prevention - \$125,000**

The creation of a new full-time Director position within the Department of Mental Health for the purpose of directing, across State government and in collaboration with community partners, including designated hospitals, agencies, crisis hotlines, and other organizations to create policies and programs to reduce death by suicide.

**VTSPC and AFSP are in support of expanding the funding recommendation of \$115,000 to \$125,000 for this program in the current budget to accommodate a Director level position.**

#### **Elder Care Clinician Program and Vet to Vet Visitor Program Expansion - \$100,000**

This funding will allow the Department of Disabilities, Aging, and Independent Living for the purpose of expanding the Elder Care Clinician Program or the Vet-to-Vet Visitor Program, or both. Both Veterans and Older Adults are at higher risk of suicide death than the general population, making this funding imperative.

**VTSPC and AFSP are in support of the funding recommendation of \$100,000 for this program in the current budget.**

#### **Mental Health Crisis Response Working Group Creation – per diem**

The Coordinated Mental Health Crisis Response Working Group will examine existing responses to mental health crises in Vermont and develop a predictable and coordinated system of response to mental health crises among law enforcement, emergency medical service providers, emergency departments, health care providers, and community mental health service providers. The Working Group will determine a process for educating individuals who respond to mental health crises, communicating with the public regarding the best way to access mental health crisis services, and ensuring connection to therapeutic services in a safe environment once the initial response has concluded. The Working Group will conclude work and terminate on December 1, 2022.

**VTSPC and AFSP are asking for this program to be added to the current list of funded programs, with a budget adjustment of a per diem rate for members of the working group.**

**Please note: VTSPC and AFSP support the 10% increase being requested by DAs and SSAs. They are a critical part of the continuum of care in VT and the workforce issues they are facing are acute.**

We have all experienced another difficult year with a continuation of unexpected changes to daily life. Vermonters continue to experience social isolation, economic stress, negative health impacts and mental health challenges. We welcome the opportunity to offer comments and are available to provide testimony or answer questions at your convenience. Thank you for your continued work and support in helping maintain the mental health of Vermonters!