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Elements of a Suicide Policy for Holding Cells, Jails, Lock-Up Facilities and Detention Centers

This guide, originally developed by the Texas Commission on Jail Standards, outlines the basic elements that should be included in a jail suicide prevention policy manual.

The policy should incorporate the following elements.

I. Training

Jails should state topics to be covered, which should include the following at minimum.

- Recognition or identification of potentially suicidal inmates
- Supervision
- Documentation
- Handling inmates
- Communication between staff
- Intervention, including how to cut down a hanging inmate and other first aid measures
- Reporting
- Follow-up review
- Optional: liability issues, both federal and state-specific

II. Identification

- Jails should specify when and how staff should screen inmates for suicidal behavior, including designating who is in charge of that process. (Note: All inmates should be screened as soon as it's practical upon admission. Exceptions include inmates unable to complete the process due to severe intoxication or inmates who refuse to participate in the process. Inmates unable to complete the screening process should be closely observed and temporarily housed in a section of the jail that allows for increased supervision. They should then be screened as soon as intoxication subsides. Inmates who refuse to participate in the screening process should be asked to sign the screening form indicating their refusal, or the booking office should make the appropriate notation on the form. Specify when additional attempts will be made to complete the screening form.)
- Jails should explain what other sources will be used to identify a suicidal inmate. (Sources could include an arresting officer's observation, family members or significant others, and prior jail records.) Some jurisdictions post a notice in the visitor's section of the jail asking people to notify staff if they detect suicidal behavior. Other jails keep a record on file or a computer listing of past and present inmates in their facility on suicide watch. The file is reviewed during every booking.



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- Jails should recommend a policy for ongoing identification since staff should be alert at all times to potentially suicidal inmates.
- Jails should specify procedures regarding mental health referrals (including emergency commitment). Jails should also identify mental health professionals, such as the following, who should be contacted.
 - Qualified mental health staff in jail or medical staff (including nurses, nurse practitioners and/or physician's assistants)
 - Contracted service provider in the community (on-call psychiatrist, county mental health clinic, etc.)
 - MHMR administrator
 - Volunteer group (qualified and approved in local jurisdiction)
- Jails should attach a screening form to the plan. (See example developed by New York Department of Corrections.)

III. Communication

- Jails should explain how information regarding suicidal inmates is shared among staff.
- Jails should specify information to be documented regarding suicidal inmates. (Include not only times checked, but also what was observed.)
- Jails should identify where the screening form will be maintained.

IV. Housing

- Jails should specify the type of housing used.
- Suicidal inmates should be housed in the general population, unless that's contrary to classification requirements. (Note: Isolation should not be used unless constant supervision can be maintained.)
- Jails should identify what steps staff took to reduce the likelihood of a suicide attempt, including removing clothing hooks, installing nonprotruding lighting, using glazing instead of bars, preventing the use of tearaway clothing, and removing towels and blankets.
- Jails should list what items staff members routinely remove from suicidal inmates.
- Jails should not only identify staff members who can make an inmate strip or be forced to use restraints, but also the necessary steps that need to be taken before that is allowed.
- Jails should also specify duration.

V. Supervision

- Jails should specify how often suicidal inmates will be observed. Three levels of supervision are recommended. (Note: This is not an all-inclusive list of different suicide types and should be expanded depending on your city or county's plan.)
 - Continuous observation for high-risk, acutely suicidal inmates who have either verbalized specific plans to commit suicide or have attempted suicide. Jails should also specify how this is to be accomplished.



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- Fifteen-minute observation for moderate-risk suicidal inmates released from constant observation, inmates who have a prior history of suicidal behavior but no apparent intent at present, manipulative inmates who threaten suicide but are not judged to be legitimately suicidal, and inmates who are too intoxicated to complete intake screening or refuse to participate in the process.
- Thirty-minute observation for low-risk suicidal inmates released from 15-minute observation.
- Jails should state who may authorize or discontinue a suicide watch as well as decide the length of the watch.
- Jails should specify where cell checks will be documented. (Note: Cell checks should be staggered so that inmates do not anticipate the check.)
- Jails should specify that if television and audio monitoring are used, that it is in addition to staff supervision.

VI. Intervention

- Jails should state what actions staff should take when discovering that a suicide has taken place or is in progress. You should also specify next steps, including cutting down hanging inmates, administering CPR or other first aid, and calling paramedics.
- Jails should identify the efforts staff should make to communicate with potentially suicidal inmates prior to an attempt plus the information they should expect to learn.
- Jails should list available first aid equipment, including its exact location.
- Jails should identify how many officers per shift are certified in CPR.

VII. Reporting

- Jails should specify the chain of command for reporting a suicide, including filing a custodial death report with the required law enforcement official.
- Jails should define when and how staff members notify family members.
- Jails should activate a crisis plan for media relations.
- Jails should specify procedures for obtaining staff and inmate statements regarding knowledge of a suicide.

VIII. Follow-Up/Review

- Jails should specify who investigates a suicide. (An independent agency is recommended.)
- Jails should require that all suicide prevention policies be reviewed following a suicide to determine if any policies need to be revised.
- Jails should recommend provision of support services and/or counseling for staff following their involvement in a suicide-related incident.

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