

# Phoenix Families: Suicide Postvention Toolkit for the Native American Community in Los Angeles County



This Project is a Product of the AI/AN UsCC Subcommittee  
The LACDMH 24/7 Help Line (LACDMH 24/7 Help Line 800-854-7771)



## A Practical Guide to Healing After Suicide Loss

# Table of Contents

Introduction: Suicide and Postvention 3

---

Immediate Trauma Response Resources 9

---

Support Systems 11

---

The Community's Mental Health Needs 15

---

The Family's Needs 17

---

Death Management Services 25

---

Native American CORE Team 28

---

Prevention & Resources 30

# Introduction

Losing someone by suicide is one of the worst experiences you can face, surviving this loss is second. Losing someone by suicide is different than a conventional death, you can often be left with feelings of guilt, confusion and emotions that is unique to grieving a suicide loss. The first few weeks are so hard, you are often in shock, disbelief, sadness and it may be difficult to think straight, followed by the first year which continues to be difficult, we hope that this toolkit will help you. We received valuable feedback from the American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) community in Los Angeles County, many with lived experiences to assist us with writing this toolkit to make sure it is culturally relevant.

***“We need to have more open discussions in our community on suicide.”***

***- Community Member***



# The Impact of Suicide

Suicide is intentionally causing one's own death and is one of the leading causes of death in the US. It can affect people of all ages, gender, race, and economic status. The overall rates of suicide across the US have increased in recent years and the suicide rates among American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) are the highest than any other racial/ethnic group. Unfortunately, what we heard while developing this toolkit is that suicide is still so stigmatized and often not talked about in our AI/AN communities, in fact many participants thanked us for having community discussions on postvention as suicide is an important topic and should be talked about more among AI/ANs. Reducing stigma around suicide allows people who lost someone by suicide to get more support and use resources such as this toolkit.

One of the ways to reduce stigma is being aware of the language about suicide. The term committed suicide is no longer used as it inadvertently places blame on the person who died. Committed implies that it was a crime, and places blame on the person who died. It is more common to use the phrase "died by suicide" instead of "committed suicide,"

There are many reasons why a person dies by suicide and it is associated with a diverse set of factors, and cannot be contributed to just one cause, such as depression. While suicidal behavior can be a symptom of depression, only a small fraction of people with depression dies by suicide.

When an AI/AN community member dies by suicide, the loss can perpetuate a cycle of trauma and loss for that individual's family, friends, and other community members. Studies have shown that individuals who lost someone close to them often experience depression, anxiety and physical problems as well there is a higher risk of them attempting suicide themselves. The stigma about suicide also has an impact, family members may be afraid to talk about suicide due to feeling judged and blamed and as a result often isolate.



# Myths and Facts of Suicide

## **Myth 1: Talking about suicide gives the person the idea**

Fact: Talking about suicide may reduce suicidal thoughts and suicide. It opens the door for a discussion and helps the person get support. People are often relieved that someone asked, and it gives them a chance to talk about their struggles and possibly get help.

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## **Myth 2: People who say they are thinking about suicide are just seeking attention.**

Fact: People who say they are thinking of suicide should be taken seriously.

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## **Myth 3: It takes just one negative event, experience, thought or period of hardship for someone to die by suicide.**

Fact: Suicide is complex and there are many reasons why people die from suicide. It is usually not just one thing but a combination of things, such as a person's experience, beliefs, mental health, coping skills, and more.

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## **Myth 4: Only certain types of people become suicidal**

Fact: Suicide can impact everyone, and everyone has the potential for suicide. There is not one type of person. People with suicidal thoughts can be a friend, a neighbor, family members, tribal member, celebrities, politicians and anyone with risk factors.

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**Myth 5: Only individuals with mental health issues die by suicide.**

Fact: Many individuals with mental health issues are not impacted by suicidal thoughts and not all individuals who die or attempt suicide have mental health issues. Again suicide is complex and there can be many reasons such as relationship problems and other life stressors such as legal problems, loss of home, death of a love one, a terrible illness, trauma, any type of crisis can also be associated with suicidal thoughts, attempts or suicide.

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**Myth 6: People who die by suicide are selfish or weak.**

Fact: People who die by suicide are in intense emotional pain and do not see any way out of it. The reasons for suicide are quite complex and is commonly associated with mental health issues and substance use.

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**Myth 7: Someone who attempts suicide will not try again**

Fact: Many people who die from suicide have had previous attempts.

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# What is Postvention?

Postvention is having a coordinated plan in place before a suicide death occurs in a family or community to help mobilize support in a timely manner to ensure services and supports are available. Postvention supports facilitate the healing of individuals impacted by suicide, lessen the negative effects of losing someone to suicide and prevent suicide among individuals who are at high risk after someone close to them dies by suicide. After a suicide, AI/AN adolescents and young adults are at greater risk for suicide contagion and cluster formation than other age demographics. Postvention supports are so important for AI/AN families and communities.



# Cultural Perspectives on Grief & Healing

In AI/AN's perspectives on grief, loss, dying and healing can differ among various individuals and tribes. It is important to approach this with a lot of cultural humility and an understanding that the way each person who is grieving and healing is unique to them. Each person's perspective will be based on their own cultural identity, tribal beliefs, personal resources, community support, religious and spiritual beliefs and many others.

During our community discussions many participants talked about how grief and healing can differ so much among individuals particularly among AI/ANs in large urban areas such as Los Angeles. Some are Christian and have different beliefs than someone who is more spiritual, as well some have their own tribal beliefs.

Some common themes are that in many AI/ANs families and communities, many family and community members come together for that family to provide support. Extended family members are often involved with decisions regarding burial and mourning. Some may receive more Western type of support in the grieving process and others may seek ceremonies and traditional medicine support to assist with grieving. It is important for community members and providers to understand that there are so many ways to express grief and allow the grieving individuals to grieve in their own way and at their own pace. There may even be differences among family members on how they grieve and type of support each family member may need.

Today, there are 574 tribal nations and villages in the USA, each tribe is different and has its own history and culture around death, grief and healing. Something that is common among many tribes is that the individual who dies goes on their spiritual journey to their ancestors. This belief that the person who dies will be with ancestors and that we will see them again can assist in coping with a death.

***“In Los Angeles there is so much diversity among Native people. Tribal differences, values and beliefs, so we have to take that in consideration.”***

***- Community Member***



# Immediate Support



## **Preparing for Challenges – Leaning on Family & Community**

When a death by suicide occurs, it can evoke intense and overwhelming emotions for family members and friends. Feelings of shock, anger, anxiety, fear, confusion, and even guilt may arise and manifest mentally, emotionally, and physically. These emotions are a natural response to such a devastating loss. However, it is crucial to have a support system in place to provide immediate care, advocacy, and stability for the grieving family.

**“Reach out and be there for the family. Do not ask what you can do or what the family needs, just do it.”**

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## **Early Support Systems and Immediate Action**

Establishing a support network as soon as possible after the loss is essential. This network can assist the family in working with law enforcement, organizing funeral arrangements, fundraising efforts, communicating with relatives and community members, and other critical tasks. Dealing with a death by suicide often involves unique legal, cultural, and emergency challenges that may feel overwhelming. This is a time to lean on trusted family, friends, community members, and trusted resources who can provide emotional and logistical support.

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## Guidance Through Native Cultural Traditions

For American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) families, reaching out to your Tribal leaders, Elders, and community and the broader Los Angeles Native community can provide unique guidance during this difficult process. Many families find strength in:

- Traditional healing practices such as prayer, songs, or cleansing ceremonies.
- Consulting with Tribal Elders, spiritual leaders, or healers for guidance on funeral arrangements, ceremonies, or transporting the body to Tribal lands.
- Contacting the Tribal Office or leaders to clarify cultural protocols, especially when working with outside agencies or organizations.

If the family wishes to hold a traditional ceremony or transport their loved one to Tribal lands, it is important to immediately coordinate with Tribal representatives to ensure cultural protocols and necessary arrangements are honored

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### **A Mobile Crisis Intervention Team may be needed**

A Mobile Crisis Intervention Team is a group of trained professionals who respond to urgent mental health emergencies. They provide on-site support, mental health assessments, de-escalation techniques, and connections to additional resources. For AI/AN families, these teams can act as intermediaries between first responders and the family, addressing cultural sensitivities that may otherwise cause distress.

Navigating the aftermath of suicide often requires external support to manage immediate emotional and logistical challenges. A Mobile Crisis Intervention Team can play a key role in advocating for the family, de-escalating the crisis, and ensuring culturally sensitive care.

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# Support For Survivors

## The Importance of Support Systems

In order to help families & community members navigate grief and loss, it is vital that strong, accessible support systems are there for those who are experiencing a traumatic, life-changing event. Regular check-ins from trusted, loved ones, grief counseling accessibility and community ceremonies all offer solace and help us feel less isolated in their healing journey.

**Reach out.** Counseling and grief services are important in the very beginning, but it is also the continuation of these services that allow community members to reach out when they need it the most. Grief may look different in the first few weeks, compared to years after the event. Peer support, sustained community outreach and local grief groups can help sustain connectivity when those affected may want to isolate. Together, these approaches underline the importance of combining personal, cultural, and practical resources to build a comprehensive system that supports families through every stage of grief.

Addressing the needs of children during times of immediate crisis is also essential. It can be difficult to explain loss and mental health struggles in a way that children can understand, but excluding them from these conversations can increase their anxiety. The resources listed are intended as a guide for families in talking about these topics with children in age-appropriate ways.

***“All the significant holidays in the first year, birthdays, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day and the anniversary of the death can be extremely difficult.”***

***- Community Member***



# One Month After

In times of uncertainty and healing, connection becomes our greatest strength. For the AI/AN community, finding ways to stay connected—whether through technology, shared memories, or spiritual practices—can help bridge the gaps created by distance, loss, and the challenges of modern life. By weaving together available tools, we can create a stronger, more supportive environment for our families and youth.

At the heart of healing is the act of remembering. Gathering as a family to share memories—of loved ones lost, of traditions passed down, of the moments that made us who we are—is an essential part of honoring our past and shaping our future. These gatherings are not just about storytelling; they are about reclaiming the narrative of our lives and ensuring that the wisdom of our elders continue to guide us.

Counseling services are an important resource, but they must be accessible and culturally sensitive to meet the unique needs of our community. Whether it's individual therapy, group sessions, or community-based approaches, revisiting these services ensures that everyone has the support they need during life's most challenging moments.

Spiritual blessings are another cornerstone of healing and connection. They remind us of the power of ceremony, prayer, and community in fostering resilience and hope. Whether it's through a traditional blessing, a personal moment of reflection, or a communal ceremony, these practices ground us in our beliefs and help us navigate life's uncertainties with grace and strength.

By embracing these pathways—technology, memory sharing, counseling, and spiritual blessings—we can create a stronger, more connected future for our families. Each of these elements serves as a thread in the larger tapestry of our community, reminding us that healing is not something we do alone but something we achieve together. Through connection, reflection, and tradition, we can find peace.





# Three - Four Months After Loss

Oftentimes, check-ins from community members can start to dwindle and yet the months after the loss are some of the most important times to check in with those that are grieving the loss. While outreach and support often diminish after a funeral, the journey of grief continues for families, who require ongoing follow-up and aftercare to navigate this challenging path. Maintaining frequent check-ins with loved ones goes beyond being a thoughtful practice; it is a necessity that fosters connection, provides reassurance, and strengthens the bonds that unify us as a community.

Effectively addressing the needs of families hinges on consistent access to essential resources, which are most impactful when they are brought closer to those who require them. Establishing local community hubs can serve as vital centers where families find food, health services, and other critical forms of support, providing both physical and emotional security in times of need.

Ensuring the success of these initiatives requires a robust approach to funding, which must be rooted in the collective strength of the community. Fundraising efforts led by the community ensure that the resources obtained genuinely reflect the priorities and values of those they aim to serve. By sharing American Indian (AI) voices and demonstrating the transformative power of collective action, we can inspire belief in our cause and encourage meaningful contributions.

***“Be there for the family, send them a note, take them to eat, bring them to a beading class, give them a call, let them know you are thinking of them.”***

**- Community Member**

# Six - Twelve Months After Loss

Grief intervention requires sustained and continuous support, and finding the right support can make all the difference in someone's healing process. For many, support groups and grief counseling serve as lifelines during some of life's most challenging moments.

One example of meaningful outreach is the practice of sending postcards to grieving families on the anniversary of a loved one's passing. These cards, often containing information about additional mental health resources, serve as gentle reminders that help is always available. This practice acknowledges the ongoing nature of grief and offers a lifeline to those who might otherwise feel forgotten. Ensuring that every grieving family receives this support can create a more compassionate approach to mental health outreach.

Support groups are another invaluable resource. Grief counseling sessions, such as those offered by Didi Hirsch (see resources), provide safe environments where individuals can confront their pain, share their experiences, and begin to heal. These spaces offer the opportunity to connect with survivors who have endured similar losses. Peer specialists can bring an empathy that can be profoundly comforting to those just beginning their journey, creating a bridge of understanding that fosters hope and resilience.

The role of community and culture in the grieving process cannot be understated. Ceremonies and dances, held to honor the memory of those who have passed, serve not only as commemorations but also as collective healing experiences. On the anniversaries of significant losses, these gatherings offer a way to channel the profound emotions that such milestones evoke. They provide a space where grief is transformed into a celebration of life, reinforcing bonds within the community and affirming the importance of shared traditions.



# The Community's Mental Health Needs

After a suicide, the community can greatly be impacted, so there should be support available for community members as well. Besides providing resources for individual therapy, we can offer community talking circles, Grief and loss groups, suicide prevention trainings and postvention groups. Having the community come together for a meal and just to be together is important.

Community members often reported that when it comes to mental health and emotional well-being, it is often difficult to find spaces where we feel truly seen and understood. For those in the AI/AN community, this challenge is even greater. The hesitation to share personal feelings with non-Native providers can be deeply rooted in a history of misunderstanding, judgment, and cultural disregard from those outside of the community. This fear can prevent many from seeking the help they so deeply need and deserve.

When we talk about mental health, it's not just about the individual. Anxiety, depression, and the weight of being on edge does not exist in isolation. These struggles can manifest as anger, create tension in relationships, and even transfer to children, becoming generational trauma. The ability to safely share and process these emotions with someone who understands our unique experiences can break these cycles. This is why counseling providers who make people feel genuinely safe are essential.

The impact of cultural sensitivity in healthcare cannot be understated. AI/AN professionals have the power to educate larger healthcare systems on how to care for Indigenous patients with respect and understanding.

Our community needs healing that comes from within. AI/AN psychologists and medicine people play an irreplaceable role in providing this kind of care. They bring not only professional expertise but also a shared cultural understanding that makes it safer to disclose something deeply personal without fear of judgment or misunderstanding. It would be beneficial to increase the amount of Native-led clinics throughout Los Angeles County—places where our people could find culturally informed care and feel empowered to heal without having to hide parts of themselves.



But healing isn't just about counseling—it's also about stability. Many families in our community carry the heavy burden of being the sole provider. This responsibility can bring constant stress, especially when resources are limited and safety nets are few. For some, it means working long hours or multiple jobs just to ensure that their family has the basics: food on the table, a roof overhead, and a sense of security. Yet, the toll of this relentless effort can weigh heavily on emotional and mental health, creating ripple effects that impact the entire household.

When we invest in these resources, we're not just supporting today's families—we're honoring the resilience of our ancestors and building a future where our children can thrive without carrying the same burdens.

It's time to create spaces where our people can find healing, stability, and dignity. With more AI/AN mental health clinics, psychologists, and traditional medicine people guiding our care, with greater financial and institutional support, we can build a future where asking for help is no longer a source of fear, but a path to healing.



# The Family's Needs



## Emotional Support

Experiencing the loss of a loved one by suicide is profoundly challenging, and returning to any sense of normalcy may feel unattainable. During this time, family members might find it difficult to navigate even minor daily tasks. Leaning on trusted family members, friends, and community support can help establish systems of care and trust. Supporters who step forward during this time should strive to be empathetic, patient, and present. Offering a listening ear, avoiding judgment, and respecting cultural or spiritual protocols surrounding grief and ceremonies are essential ways to provide meaningful support.

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## For those supporting the family, keep the following in mind:

- **Be an Active Listener:** Often, family members may not know what they need or how to articulate their feelings. Instead of assuming or offering unsolicited advice, practice active listening to truly understand how to assist them.
  - **Respect Their Boundaries:** Grieving families may not always be ready to receive help, or they may prefer solitude. Acknowledging and respecting these boundaries without taking offense can strengthen the trust they have in you.
  - **Check on the Youth:** Young family members often require additional care and attention during times of loss. Establish safe spaces where they can process their emotions. Involving elders, older youth, and parents in conversations can offer diverse perspectives and guidance, helping young ones better navigate the grieving process.
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## For the grieving family:

- **Ask for Help Without Hesitation:** Grief can make reaching out feel vulnerable, but asking for help is an act of strength. By allowing loved ones to support you, you foster a reciprocal flow of care that strengthens connections during this difficult time.
  - **Focus on Small Steps:** Meeting immediate needs, whether for meals, childcare, or household chores, can help create stability while you take the time you need to process your grief.
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## Practical Support - Meal Assistance

In the aftermath of a suicide, everyday responsibilities like cooking and eating may seem insignificant or impossible to handle. However, nourishing the body is an integral part of self-care during times of emotional distress. This is where the support of family, friends, and the wider community becomes invaluable. Food can serve as both medicine and a source of healing, particularly when shared with others who provide comfort and understanding.

- **Organize Community Dinners:** If the family is comfortable with it, hosting a community dinner can provide both physical nourishment and emotional solidarity. Relatives and close friends coming together in this way can create a healing environment. Be mindful, however, that the family may not be ready for such gatherings and respect their preference for privacy.
  - **Coordinate Meal Preparation:** Reach out to community members to organize meal delivery for the family. This could involve preparing a single meal, several meals, or even a week's worth of food. Small gestures like these can make a significant impact.
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## Practical Support - Meal Assistance

- **Seek Assistance From Organizations:** Partnering with local AIAN organizations can help provide financial support for meals. These organizations may offer grocery gift cards or connect families to food pantries.
- **Utilize your local food banks:** Food banks are an amazing resource to utilize and many are available to everybody without needing to prove you need. Many provide produce, fruits, and canned goods to fill a family up with all the needed nutrients. Utilize our resources page to locate a food bank closest to you.

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## Transportation

After the coroner notifies the family that the process is complete, the family or nearest kin has 72 hours to arrange transportation of the body to a funeral home. Generally, the medical director coordinates the initial transportation, but a funeral home can assist in this process as well.

Transporting a loved one's body can be an emotionally and logistically challenging task, especially when funds or reliable transportation are limited. Depending on whether the body needs to be transported within California or across state lines, there are different options to consider, each with its own set of regulations:

- **Transport by Car:** This is often the most cost-effective option, but it requires the body to be properly sealed in an approved shipping container. Additionally, depending on the destination, state regulations may require embalming or refrigeration to ensure compliance during transit.
- **Air or Train Transport:** For longer distances, shipping the body by air or train may be necessary. These methods can be more expensive, but many funeral homes have partnerships with transportation services that can streamline the process.



## Steps for Transportation Assistance

Below are steps and resources to help navigate the transportation process, especially for families facing financial challenges:

1. **Work with the Funeral Home:** Funeral homes are experienced in arranging body transportation and may offer discounted rates or payment plans. Be transparent about your financial situation—they may connect you with organizations or services that can reduce costs or provide logistical assistance.
  2. **Seek Tribal Assistance:** If the deceased was affiliated with a Tribe, contact Tribal leadership or programs for support. Many Tribes have emergency funds or assistance programs to help with funeral and transportation costs.
  3. **Understand State Regulations:** When transporting a body across state lines, ensure compliance with state-specific requirements such as embalming, refrigeration, or documentation. Funeral homes or medical examiners can provide guidance.
  4. **Crowdfunding for Support:** Platforms like GoFundMe or Facebook Fundraisers allow families to share their stories and gather financial support from their networks. Clearly outline the transportation costs and other related expenses to build trust and inspire contributions.
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## Resources for Transportation Assistance

1. **Leverage Nonprofit and Religious Organizations:** Many nonprofits and faith-based organizations offer financial aid, logistical support, or even direct services for families in need of body transportation. Reach out to local AIAN organizations.
  2. **Utilize Affordable Transport Options:**
    - a. **Ground Transport:** When air travel is cost-prohibitive, consider professional ground transport services, which can be more affordable and accessible for in-state transportation.
    - b. **Bereavement Air Travel:** Some airlines provide discounted bereavement fares for family members or cargo transport. Check with airlines directly for their policies.
  3. **Seek Gas or Travel Vouchers:** For families transporting the body by car, some organizations provide gas vouchers, bus passes, or Uber/Lyft gift cards to ease the financial burden.
  4. **Ask for Support from Family and Friends:** Lean on your extended family and community for assistance. They may be able to contribute financially, offer logistical support, or help with planning and decision-making during this difficult time.
  5. **Review Insurance or Pre-Planning Policies:** Check if the deceased had life insurance or pre-planned funeral arrangements. These policies may cover transportation costs or provide resources to assist with the process. Funeral homes can often help review these documents and offer guidance.
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## **Financial Assistance**

We know that something like this can never be prepared and with this, there may be financial burdens that the family is not prepared to cover such as funeral arrangements, transportation fees, home bills, etc. Although there are some programs to help with emergency situations such as this, there are not many and you may have to reach out to your Tribe, community, family, and friends for assistance.

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## **Fundraising**

Fundraising is a great opportunity to really reach a wider community of folks to provide aid financially. Consider asking a trusted relative to support organizing the fundraiser as this task can be overwhelming. You can use sites such as GoFundMe to organize the funds you raise and to have an opportunity to share your story and why you are fundraising and what the money will be used for. There is no fee to start or manage the account, however there is a transaction fee of 2.9% + \$0.30 fee per donation. To account for this transaction fee, consider making your fundraising goal slightly higher than the actual amount needed.

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# Steps to Fundraise

1. **Choose the Right Platform:** Select a reputable crowdfunding site that aligns with your needs. Platforms like GoFundMe offer user-friendly interfaces and have been used successfully for memorial funds.
2. **Share Your Story:** Clearly and compassionately share your loved one's story, emphasizing the positive aspects of their life and the impact they had on others. This personal touch can resonate with potential donors.
3. **Set a Clear Goal:** Determine a specific fundraising target to cover expenses such as funeral costs, memorial services, transportation to Tribal lands, or support for surviving family members. Clearly communicate how the funds will be used to build trust with donors.
4. **Engage Your Network:** Share the fundraiser with close friends and family first to gather initial support. Their contributions can build momentum before you expand outreach to a broader audience.
5. **Utilize Social Media:** Leverage social media platforms to reach a wider audience. Regular updates and heartfelt messages can encourage sharing and increase visibility.
6. **Organize Memorial Events:** Consider hosting events like memorial walks, candlelight vigils, or community gatherings to honor your loved one. These events can also serve as fundraising opportunities and foster community support.
7. **Acknowledge Donations:** Express gratitude to donors through thank-you messages or public acknowledgments. Showing appreciation can encourage continued support and sharing of your cause.
8. **Provide Updates:** Keep supporters informed about the progress of your campaign and how the funds are being utilized. Transparency fosters trust and ongoing engagement.
9. **Seek Professional Guidance:** If you're unsure about the process, consider consulting with professionals or organizations experienced in fundraising for similar causes. They can offer valuable insights and support.

By thoughtfully implementing these strategies, you can create a meaningful fundraiser that honors your loved one's memory, and provides necessary support during this difficult period.

## Cleaning Assistance

Depending on the process of the death, the scene may need to be thoroughly cleaned. Whether there are bodily fluids or not, this may be an extremely difficult task but unfortunately it is left to those in residence to clean anything not taken to be investigated. Be sure to navigate our resources section to locate cleaning services who specialize in biohazard cleanup.

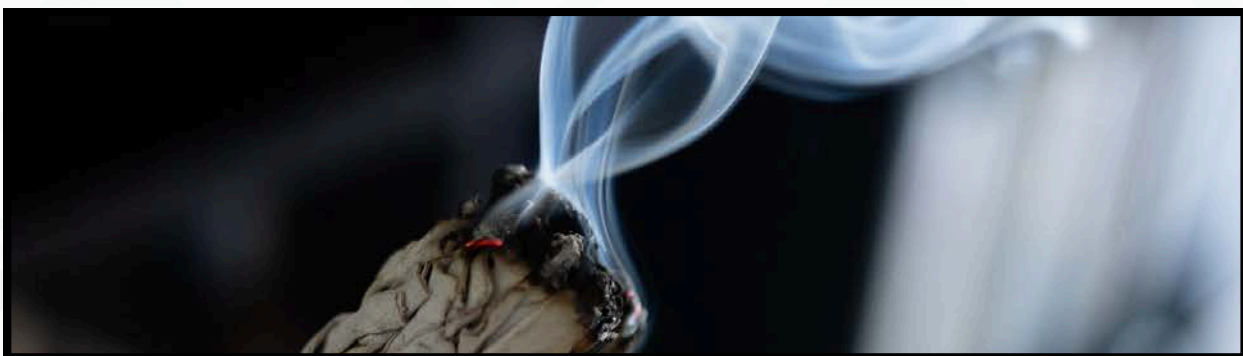
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### Cleaning the Scene

- Families may choose to clean the area themselves, but this can be emotionally and physically challenging.
- Hiring a **certified cleaning company** is a practical option, especially when bodily fluids are involved. Costs may be covered by homeowner's insurance policies – families are not obligated to use any cleaning company recommended by the insurance provider.
- Contact community organizations or Tribal programs for financial assistance if needed.

Navigating the family's needs after the loss of a loved one is undoubtedly overwhelming but a priority to healing. Leaning on family and community to understanding your options and utilizing available resources can alleviate stress and help honor your loved one's journey. The next section will focus on Death Management, providing further guidance on handling funeral arrangements and ceremonial needs.

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# Death Management



## Checklist for logistical steps after the death of a loved one:

1. **Get copies of the death certificate.** “You will need these to file insurance claims, cancel credit cards and close financial accounts. If the deceased person’s remains are in L.A. County, contact the county Department of Public Health’s Vital Records office for a copy of the death certificate. Under state law, the attending physician is generally the one required to fill out the necessary medical information and sign the certificate, and the funeral director is the one who submits it to the registry.”
2. **Locate a will (if there is one).**
3. **Identify beneficiaries.** “If your loved one had named a beneficiary or beneficiaries for insurance policies, retirement funds and bank accounts, those assets can be paid out or transferred directly without waiting for probate.”
4. **Stop Social Security payments** (if applicable). Call 800-772-1231.
5. **Contact financial institutions, insurers and credit reporting agencies to notify of the death.**
6. **Cancel the driver’s license at the DMV website** (if applicable).
7. **Notify the Postal Service.** Check in with your local post office.

Grief is one of the heaviest burdens we carry, and for many in the AIAN community, it can feel compounded by the lack of resources and culturally relevant support systems. Whether it is dealing with burial costs, seeking guidance from elders, or finding ways to heal emotionally, the journey through loss requires a network of care that reflects our traditions and values.

One of the most immediate challenges during loss is managing burial costs. These costs often have time constraints, adding stress to an already overwhelming situation. What our community needs is an outline of expected actions and available resources—something clear, actionable, and accessible. A helpline (reference resource below with images) dedicated to these situations could provide guidance during moments of uncertainty. Beyond this, it is essential to offer support for traditional burials, ensuring families can honor their loved ones in ways that align with their spiritual and cultural practices.

Cultural traditions are the foundation of healing, and our elders carry the wisdom of those traditions. Their guidance is invaluable, but access to it is not always easy. A network of elders who can provide advice and share cultural knowledge would give families the tools they need to navigate grief while staying connected to their roots.



Healing is not just about traditions; it's also about addressing the body, mind and spirit. Psychosomatic therapies, like tapping and/or Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), can be powerful tools to process grief and trauma. These therapies, combined with culturally aware counseling resources, create pathways for emotional recovery. Native Organizations (see resources) have been culturally-relevant lifelines, helping individuals navigate their pain and avoid destructive paths due to grief.

Grief can also awaken struggles with substance abuse, leading to a relapse for those in recovery. It is vital to offer substance abuse support specifically tailored to the unique challenges of grieving. Resources that combine addiction recovery with cultural understanding can provide the strength and structure people need to stay on their path to healing.

Even practical matters like cleaning out homes or rooms after a loss can feel insurmountable when grief is fresh. Additional support for these tasks—whether through cleaning services or community volunteers—can help lighten the burden. These small acts of assistance allow individuals to focus on healing without being overwhelmed by the physical reminders of their loss.

Grieving is never easy, but with the right resources and support, it can become a journey of healing and connection rather than one of isolation. By building networks of elders, expanding access to culturally sensitive therapies, and providing practical and emotional support, we can create a community where no one has to navigate grief alone. Together, we can honor those we've lost while ensuring that their memory strengthens and uplifts us.



# Forming a Native American Community Team: CORE

***“We need a Native American team to respond to a death by suicide our community.”***

***- Community Member***

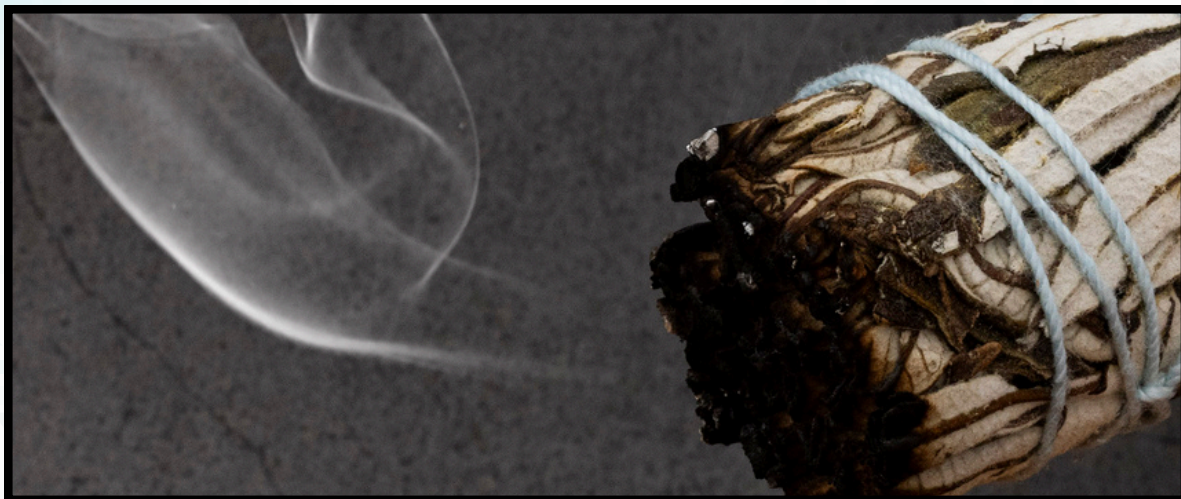
Many AI/AN community members have reported feeling a lack of compassionate and/or sustained mental health support from county services. One potential way to combat this very real problem is to create a culturally-competent group of people for a suicide prevention and response coalition team. It would likely be a small group of trusted, trained individuals and their primary purpose would consist of helping manage the community's response to any death by suicide.

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## **Considerations When Developing the Team**

An appropriate strategy for developing the CORE team could be looking specifically for AI/AN community leaders, traditional healers or social service workers experienced in crisis management. As well, including youth leaders and peer mentors in this group would also be beneficial for the team's effectiveness and success.

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# The Benefits of a CORE Team

1. **Sharing information:** Keep in active communication with first responders to stay informed of any deaths by suicide within the community and communicate appropriately.
2. **Coordinating community support:** Plan and carry out logistical steps to support survivors and community by connecting affected people to help with mental health resources and appropriate counseling.
3. **Coordinating media responses:** Share accurate information, issue press statements, or advise others on how to speak with any media representatives asking about the event.
4. **Providing education:** Be a central, reliable resource for community members who need more information on suicide prevention and postvention.
5. **Monitoring for risks:** Watch for signs of "contagion" (copycat behavior) and assess any further need for wider community responses.
6. **Long-term planning:** Collect feedback on the plan's effectiveness from those affected and offer suggestions to city councils for future prevention efforts.



# Prevention Services

Suicide prevention in the AI/AN community needs culturally grounded approaches that honor tribal traditions, address mental health stigma, and strengthen community-based support systems. Indigenous peoples face unique challenges tied to historical trauma, generational disconnection, and systemic inequities, but their traditions and resilience offer powerful tools for healing and hope.

Silence on mental health topics can often deepen the divide within communities. Generational disconnect can lead to increased mental health struggles, with elders holding knowledge of healing traditions while youth may lack exposure or access to them. Acknowledging and addressing this silence through culturally relevant conversations about suicide prevention is critical. By fostering dialogue that bridges generations, communities can reclaim these life-sustaining traditions and reframe them as tools for modern healing.

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## **Culturally Informed Mental Health Care**

One significant barrier to suicide prevention is a lack of trust in mainstream mental health systems. Many AI/AN individuals report feeling misunderstood when working with non-Native providers. A way to combat this would be expanding access to more Native psychologists, counselors, and peer specialists who understand Indigenous experiences, so that individuals can share their struggles more openly with service providers. Cultural identity can actually be a tremendous source of strength. Initiatives that help youth reconnect with their heritage—such as language preservation programs, intergenerational mentorship, or community art projects—can also serve as protective factors against suicide.

## Immediate Suicide Prevention Strategies

Immediate action during moments of crisis is essential to saving lives. Families and individuals in distress want access to culturally sensitive crisis resources such as trained crisis responders, peer specialists with lived experience, and ideally tribal-specific suicide prevention hotlines.

For suicide prevention efforts to succeed, the following elements must be prioritized:

- **Access to Help Lines:** Reduce wait times on crisis hotlines and ensure staff are culturally competent when they speak with community members.
- **Community Support Hubs:** Establish trusted spaces where individuals can access counseling, peer mentorship, and resource navigation in a stigma-free environment.
- **Visibility of Prevention Tools:** Host workshops and information booths at tribal events to share prevention strategies, provide emergency contact information, and encourage open conversations about mental health.

*“There has to be an opportunity for youth to be involved in suicide discussions.”*

*- Community Member*

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## Building Long-Term Support Systems

Suicide prevention cannot be a one-time intervention. Sustained systems of care ensure that families, individuals, and entire communities receive the ongoing support they need. These systems must include:

- **Consistent Follow-Up:** After a crisis, regular outreach—whether through counseling check-ins, community visits, or peer mentoring—can help individuals stay connected to life-saving resources.
- **Youth-Centered Programming:** Programs that engage Native youth in leadership roles, mentorship, and suicide prevention efforts empower them to advocate for mental health within their own peer circles. As well as discussions on how social media and bullying are playing more of a role in suicides among youth.



## Community Action and Advocacy

Suicide prevention is not solely a mental health issue; it requires systemic advocacy to address inequities in access to care, resources, and support. Community-driven initiatives play a vital role in creating environments where individuals feel seen and valued. Examples include:

- **Suicide Prevention Events:** Organize gatherings that combine cultural activities with mental health awareness, providing families with tools to recognize and respond to warning signs.
  - **Tribal Leadership Support:** Advocate for policies that improve mental health funding, expand access to Native-focused clinics, and train service providers via workshops and seminars.
  - **Safe Spaces for Expression:** Offer opportunities & events for community members to share their stories through art, music, writing, or talking circles.
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## A Collective Path Forward

Suicide prevention in the American Indian (AI) community requires consistent investment in Native mental health leadership opportunities, open conversations on mental health & substance abuse—these initiatives can help break cycles of silence and despair. Every life holds immense value, and every individual deserves to feel supported and understood. Together, through community-driven action, we can build a future rooted in hope, healing, and resilience—ensuring that suicide prevention becomes a shared responsibility and a collective triumph.

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# Resources

## **Los Angeles County Department of Medical Examiner**

1104 N. Mission Rd. Los Angeles, CA 90033

FAX: 323.224.8979 or CALL: 323.222.7041

After Business Hours: 323.343.0714

EMAIL: [info@me.lacounty.gov](mailto:info@me.lacounty.gov)

## **To obtain a death certificate:**

Contact the County of Los Angeles Public Health Department

DPH Vital Records Office

313 N. Figueroa Street, Room Lobby 1

Los Angeles, CA 90012

CALL: (213) 288-7816 (deaths)

Email: [VRO@ph.lacounty.gov](mailto:VRO@ph.lacounty.gov)

## **For deaths occurring in Long Beach and Pasadena:**

Long Beach Health Department - Vital Records

(562) 570-4305

Pasadena Health Department - Vital Records

(626) 744-6052

(626) 291-0899 (fax)

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## **Funeral Consumers Alliance of Los Angeles**

A nonprofit organization with the goal to help people create affordable but meaningful funeral arrangements.

**Call:** (213) 222 - 6440 or **Email:** [support@fcalosangeles.org](mailto:support@fcalosangeles.org)

2023 Price Survey Burial Cost PDF (Provides Cremation/Immediate Burial Costs in Cities Throughout LA County)

[https://www.fcalosangeles.org/\\_files/ugd/7ca633\\_53de114d9c0e4529890a867514bb8db1.pdf](https://www.fcalosangeles.org/_files/ugd/7ca633_53de114d9c0e4529890a867514bb8db1.pdf)

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## Didi Hirsch Suicide Prevention Trainings and Support Groups

Didi Hirsch SPC offers several trainings in suicide prevention and intervention. Training length and cost varies. For more information or to schedule a training contact 424-362-2907 or email [SPCCommunityTrainings@didihirsch.org](mailto:SPCCommunityTrainings@didihirsch.org)

- Suicide Risk Assessment & Intervention Training (6 hours)
- Survivors of Suicide Attempts (SOSA) Facilitator Training (2 hours)
- Applied Suicide Intervention Skills (ASIST) Training (2 days)
- SafeTALK (3 - 4 hours)
- Clinical Presentation (3 Hours)
- First Responders Presentation (3 to 6 Hours)
- Medical Presentation (1 to 3 Hours)

Teen Line – A Program of Didi Hirsch ([www.teenline.org](http://www.teenline.org))

Teen Line is a confidential hotline for teenagers which operates every evening from 6:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. PST. The Teen Line volunteers who answer the calls, emails and texts are Southern California teenagers who have received specialized training. In addition to operating the crisis line, Teen Line supports teens through the Teen Talk App, outreach, education and training.

Call 800.852.8336 from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. daily. After hours, your call will be directed to Didi Hirsch's Suicide Prevention Center. Text TEEN to 839863 from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. daily.

### Support Groups and Therapy

Survivors After Suicide Support Groups

Los Angeles & Ventura Counties: (424) 362-2911

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## Friends for Survival

Community of online peer support for those grieving a death by suicide 1-800-646-7322, <https://friendsforsurvival.org/>

We provide a variety of peer support services that comfort, encourage and educate those in grief from a suicide loss.

- Monthly meetings of grief support and education
- Newsletter of sharing and information
- Comprehensive list of resources and reference library
- Speakers available for work places and agencies impacted by a suicide death
- Education from healthcare professionals and community advocates
- Toll Free Suicide Loss Helpline: 1-800-646-7322



## **NAMI - National Alliance on Mental Health**

The NAMI HelpLine is a free, nationwide peer-support service providing information, resource referrals and support to people living with a mental health condition, their family members and caregivers, mental health providers and the public. HelpLine staff and volunteers are experienced, well-trained and able to provide guidance.

- They understand, many from their own experiences, listen and offer support.
- They are informed on NAMI Programs, NAMI Support Groups and how to locate your local NAMI Affiliate.
- They are trained to help identify the best resource options for your individual concern.
- They are knowledgeable and a source of accurate information about relevant topics.
- They care.

You are not alone! If you are struggling with your mental health, the NAMI HelpLine is here for you. Connect with a NAMI HelpLine volunteer today. Available Monday Through Friday, 10 A.M. – 10 P.M. ET.  
Call 1-800-950-NAMI (6264) or text “HelpLine” to 62640

The NAMI Teen & Young Adult HelpLine offers a direct connection with another young person who shares similar experiences and is prepared to offer information, resources, and support to help you move through difficult times to a better place.  
Call 1-800-950-6264, chat, text "Friend" to 62640

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# AI/AN Resources

## 01 Sacred Path Indigenous Wellness Center

The mission of Sacred Path is to honor our traditional values and teaching by working to improve the quality of life for indigenous individuals and families by providing innovative health, behavioral health and research with community involvement, technical assistance, training and respect for tribal and cultural diversity. Services provided include: Individual Therapy, Support Groups Workshops, Prevention and Intervention Services, Case Management, Linkages, Evaluation and Research Training and Consultation.

We provide our services to Los Angeles and Orange County American Indian/Alaskan Native residents and offer some services to Indigenous Peoples across California.

### **Locations:**

800 S Harbor Blvd, Ste 250  
Anaheim, CA 92805

236 E 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, Ste 100  
Long Beach, CA 90802

### **Contact:**

Email: [information@sacredpath.org](mailto:information@sacredpath.org)  
Phone: (626) 214-8580

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## 02 United American Indian Involvement

“Our mission is to promote and support the physical, behavioral, and spiritual well-being of American Indian/Alaska Natives in Los Angeles and Orange counties by providing comprehensive, integrated services that focus on all age groups and incorporate American Indian/Alaska Native cultures and traditions.”

### **Location:**

1453 West Temple Street  
Los Angeles, CA 90026

### **Contact:**

Email: [info@uaili.org](mailto:info@uaili.org)  
Phone: 213-202-3970

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### 03 **Sooh Shinali Sister Project**

“Our team will continue to expand wellness services for our community by continuing to center Indigenous elders, uplift contemporary representation, and through increased intergenerational, cohort-based chronic disease prevention and management offerings. We will also offer services dedicated to raising awareness, advocacy, and support for Missing and Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP) and their loved ones. We will continue to center arts and our diverse cultures through each of these services to uplift mental health and indigenize education around these critical matters impacting our community.”

Location:  
5800 S. Eastern Ave. Suite 500  
Commerce, CA 90040  
Email: [admin@sssisterproject.org](mailto:admin@sssisterproject.org)  
Tel: 323-916-6415

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### 04 **Pukúu Cultural Community Services**

Pukúu Cultural Community Services has a One Stop Emergency Service program in place to offer temporary aid to low income American Indians who encounter a financial emergency. The services individuals may qualify for are shelter and one time rental assistance, food, transportation, utility, counseling and referral, and cultural and recreational.

To apply for assistance, go to their site and apply electronically.  
<https://www.pukuu.org/services/oses/>

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## 05 **American Indian Counseling Center**

### Services Provided

- Individual therapy for children, adults, and elders.
- Foster youth community-based services including individual and/or family therapy, case management, support services and advocacy.
- Community-based, 24/7 intensive services for children, youth, adults, and older adults through the Full Service Partnership (FSP) program funded by the Mental Health Services Act (MHSA).
- Co-occurring disorder treatment and counseling for substance abuse and emotional problems.
- Case management and advocacy services to obtain housing, Medi-Cal, Medicare, and Supplemental Security Income.
- Culturally relevant support groups.
- Crisis intervention services for all ages.

17707 Studebaker Rd., Ste. 208  
Cerritos, CA 90703  
Phone: (562) 402-0677  
Fax: (562) 467-7478

### Hours of Operation

Monday – Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.

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## 06 **Indigenous Circle of Wellness**

“We offer a wide range of services for your mental health and wellness needs.”

- Psychotherapy (Individual, Couple, Family, and Group Counseling)
- Wellness Coaching
- Talking Circles and Support Groups
- Personal and Professional Development
- Mental Health and Wellness Workshops
- Organizational Consulting

### Locations:

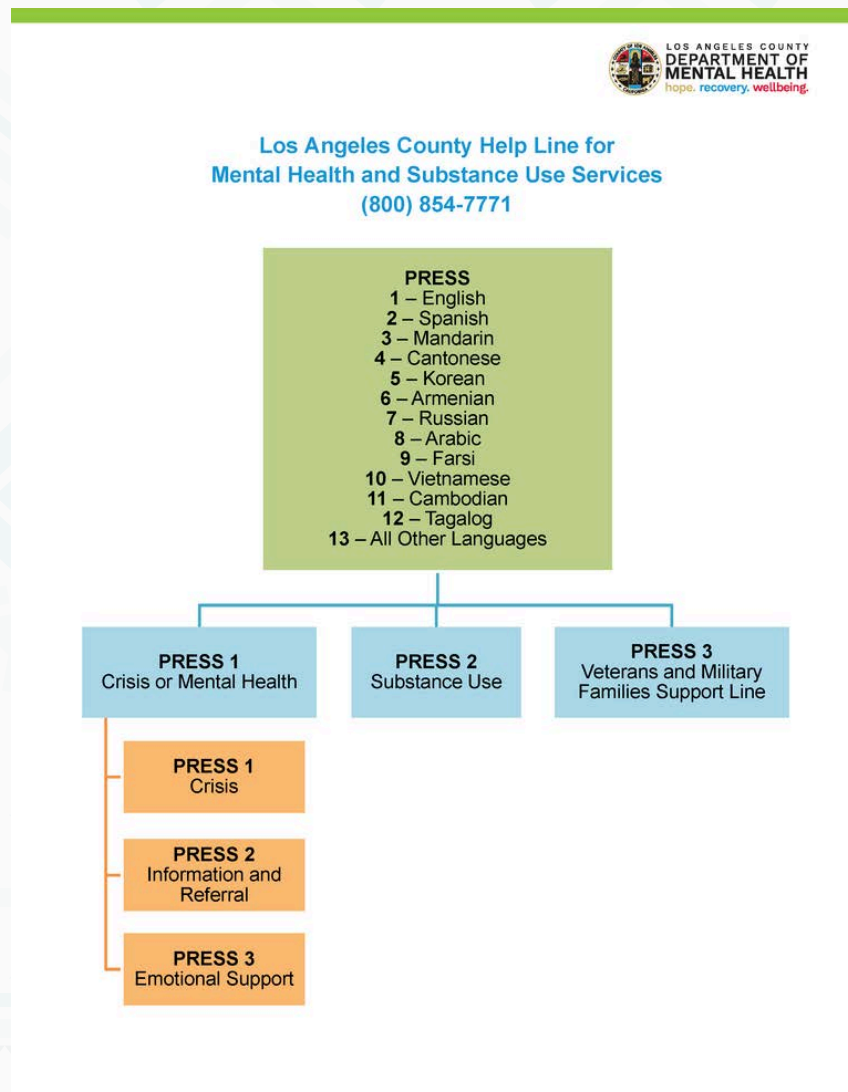
Los Angeles  
5800 South Eastern Avenue, Suite 500  
Commerce, California 90040  
(626) 782-5570  
[info@icowellness.com](mailto:info@icowellness.com)

Long Beach  
1777 N. Bellflower Blvd., Suite 206  
Long Beach, California 90815  
(626) 782-5570  
[info@icowellness.com](mailto:info@icowellness.com)

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# How to Request a Mobile Crisis Intervention Team in Los Angeles County

The services provided by the Los Angeles County Help Line offer a vital lifeline, addressing the unique behavioral health needs of individuals and families. These services, which include referrals to service providers and emotional support, help bridge gaps in mental health care. For American Indian communities that often face systemic barriers to accessing such resources, this inclusivity and availability are critical. The Substance Abuse Service Hotline (SASH) and the Veteran Line provide targeted support to vulnerable populations within the American Indian community.





## Emergency Response and Investigation

When a death by suicide occurs, survivors often face a series of legal and procedural steps that can add to their emotional burden. It is important to understand what to expect and why these processes take place.

### Emergency Responders' Roles

- Emergency Medical Services (EMS): Provide on-site medical care or transport the individual to the hospital.
  - Fire Department: Assists EMS or family members as needed.
  - Police:
    - Secure the scene and conduct a formal investigation.
    - Notify the Coroner's Office to determine the cause of death.
    - Provide safety for all individuals on the scene.
    - Retain personal items (e.g., notes, identification) for investigation purposes, which can be returned to the family upon request.
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## Coroner's Office and Autopsy Process

The Coroner's Office investigates all suicides and issues the official death certificate. If an autopsy is required, families with cultural or spiritual concerns can:

- Notify the Coroner's Office immediately.
- Complete a Certificate of Religious Belief under California Government Code §27491.43.

While exemptions may be overridden in certain cases, families are encouraged to advocate for cultural considerations during this process. For additional information or support, contact:

Office of the Chief Medical Examiner-Coroner: (323) 343-0512.

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## **After the Investigation – Moving Forward**

The next of kin assumes responsibility for handling the scene after the investigation concludes. For many families, leaning on cultural practices during this time can help bring healing and restoration to the home. This may include cleansing ceremonies, prayer, and other traditional methods.

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### **Organ and Tissue Donations:**

For some families, donating their loved one's organs or tissues provides comfort and purpose. If this is a consideration, notify the Coroner as soon as possible. Tissue donations can typically occur within 6-12 hours of death, while organ donations depend on various conditions. If a loved one is a registered organ or tissue donor but the family does not wish to proceed with the donation, it is important to communicate your concerns quickly and clearly to the coroner or medical examiner immediately. Express your family's cultural, spiritual, or personal reasons for declining organ donation. While registered donor status typically authorizes donation, families can formally object to the process.

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### **Conclusion: Building Your Support Systems**

Experiencing a death by suicide can be a deeply isolating and overwhelming process, but you are not alone. Leaning on trusted family, friends, and cultural support networks can provide much-needed stability and healing during this time. It is also essential to utilize culturally relevant services, Tribal resources, and crisis intervention programs to navigate the legal, emotional, and practical challenges that arise. The next section, Support Systems, will explore how families and communities can establish strong, long-term networks of care to promote healing, resilience, and ongoing connection.

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