

## Appendix C: Information sheet:

# recognise ask connect

This brief information sheet provides guidance for Youth Workers on how to recognise and respond to the warning signs for suicide in young people who are experiencing homelessness. It is not designed to replace formal suicide prevention training, professional training or organisational policy.

**If at any time, the young person is at imminent risk of suicide or are behaving in an aggressive or threatening way, then emergency services should be contacted immediately on Triple Zero 000.**

### 1. Recognise the warning signs

When a young person is contemplating suicide, there are often noticeable changes in their behaviour that indicate they may be at risk of suicide in the near future. These changes are called warning signs. Being able to recognise warning signs is key to preventing suicide. As young people who are experiencing homelessness are at greater risk of suicide, when they display warning signs they should be taken very seriously.

#### Warning signs may include;

- Increases in the frequency of suicidal thoughts
- Creating plans to kill oneself
- Attempting to access to lethal means
- Expressing feelings of hopelessness, being trapped or that life is not worth living
- Dramatic mood changes without external reason
- Engaging in high risk behaviours
- Withdrawing from social networks and or support services
- Changes in patterns in alcohol and other drugs use
- Giving away possessions or saying goodbye
- Increases in self-harming behaviour
- Creating safeguards to avoid discovery
- Preoccupation with suicide, death or dying
- Threatening suicide or self-harm
- Reduced care in appearance and hygiene

This list is not exhaustive and many of these warning signs can be seen in people who are not suicidal but may be experiencing a period of stress. Warning signs should be interpreted within the context of what the known usual behaviour is for the young person. For example, if a young person is often depressed, a sudden unexplained elevated mood may be interpreted as a warning sign.

### 2. Ask the question and listen

If you suspect that a young person is contemplating suicide, it is important to ask them directly if they are thinking about killing themselves. Asking about suicide is essential to determine the young person's risk of suicide. It will not put thoughts of suicide into their mind. Asking about suicide should be done in an empathetic way and where possible, within a safe and secure environment.

Ask in a way that feels natural for you. You may wish to say "Have you been thinking about killing yourself?" or "Are you considering taking your life?"

Talking with a young person who is suicidal is challenging. Be aware that asking about suicide may open up a lot of feelings that the young person wants to share and you will need to be prepared to listen and respond in a way that ensures the best possible outcome for the young person. Encourage the young person to do most of the talking. Allow them to talk about their reasons for wanting to die and their reasons for wanting to live. Do not try to solve their problems, instead listen, validate feelings and demonstrate empathy.

If you feel that you are unable to assist the young person, refer them to a co-worker who is qualified to help.

### 3. Connect to support

Depending on the needs of the person you will need to connect them to appropriate supports.

#### Connecting the young person to mental health services

There are two main mental health call centres that can provide expert and accurate advice on how to respond to person at risk of suicide. Both of these services will be able to provide support and guidance on the most appropriate course of action to ensure the best outcome for the young person.

If the person is aged under 16 years old call the Acute Response Team (ART). **1800 048 636** (Available 8am and 10pm), after 10pm call Princess Margaret Hospital directly on **08 9340 8222** and ask to speak to the Psychiatric Liaison Nurse.

If the person is over 16 years old call the Mental Health Emergency Response Line (MHERL) **1300 555 788** (24 hours).

Referring to a mental health service is not always the best option, as they may not be accessible or the young person may be at low risk of suicide. Instead it may be useful to develop a safe plan with the young person that outlines alternatives including strategies to connect to appropriate social supports.

## **What if they refuse to engage with mental health services?**

*If the young person refuses to engage with mental health services and the immediate risk of suicide is high, you will need to call emergency services on their behalf. Be clear to the young person about your reasons for doing this. Let them know that their wellbeing is your priority and it is the best way to keep them safe.*

## **What if immediate access to mental health services is not possible?**

*Often there are waitlists for mental health services, especially if the person is at low risk of suicide. In this instance it may be helpful to develop a safety plan with the young person.*

## **What if I am unsure about my actions or am feeling overwhelmed?**

*Responding to a person at risk of suicide is difficult. At times you may be unsure if you responded appropriately or you may feel overwhelmed. If you are feeling this way it is important to speak to someone about your feelings. There are a number of options available. You may wish to speak to your manager or you can call the Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467. They can provide confidential feedback on your response as well as provide support for your personal wellbeing.*

*Remember to understand the limits of your role. Even with the best care some people will still suicide.*

### **Acknowledgements**

*Headspace. N.D. Identifying risk factors and warning signs for suicide. [www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)  
Suicide Call Back Service. 2013. Suicide warning signs. [www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au](http://www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au)*

*Mental Health First Aid Training and Research Program. Suicidal thoughts and behaviours: first aid guidelines. Melbourne: Orygen Youth Health Research Centre, University of Melbourne; 2008*

### **Disclaimer**

*This factsheet has been developed for service providers who work with young people who are experiencing homelessness. It provides guidance on how to recognise and respond to a person at risk of suicide. This guide should be used in conjunction with formal suicide prevention training and organisational policy and procedures. The Youth Affairs Council has made every effort to ensure the accuracy of the information provided. The Youth Affairs Council takes no responsibility for any loss, or misuse of the information contained herewith.*