

## Overview of the Shield of Care™

The Shield of Care™ model was developed through qualitative analysis from focus groups conducted in Tennessee's Youth Development Center facilities. Each component of the Shield of Care™ model illustrates a concept identified by staff as important for youth suicide prevention. The first thing one may notice about the model is the shape - a shield. This shape was used to represent the view by juvenile justice staff that, in part, they have a major role in "protecting" youth from suicide. Staff plays active roles in intervening to protect youth from suicide and protecting youth by building resiliency. This model demonstrates that there are three distinct layers of protection. These layers of protection demonstrate the three essential elements needed for the entire process of protecting youth from suicide to be effective:

- The Organization's Policy and Procedures
- Staff's connectedness to youth
- Connectedness to each other as fellow "protectors"; in the juvenile justice facility

*Inside the Shield are essential steps/actions to take in protecting youth from suicide. These steps may not always happen in the same order or the same way depending on the facility. Each step is described below:*

### ***Seeing Increased Risk for Suicide***

Often, the first step is to "See"; that the youth is at risk for suicide. In juvenile justice communities, youth are at high risk because of the facility environment. Thus, often, one must be able to "See"; increased or immediate risk for suicide as opposed to general risk. Sometimes, because Juvenile Justice Staff may see suicidal thoughts or behaviors often in youth, one can become desensitized to suicide risk in youth. Thus, this illustrates the importance of being vigilant about "seeing" suicide risk, and also "seeing" the person behind the suicidal thoughts/behaviors.

### ***Protecting Youth's Immediate Safety (Crisis Intervention)***

Once suicide risk is identified in youth, staff members need to protect that youth's immediate physical and emotional safety before bringing up the topic of suicide directly. If it is a crisis situation, this may include staff protecting the youth's emotional safety by choosing a private place to talk to the youth, and talking about the boundaries of confidentiality.



### ***Listening to the Youth's Concerns/Suicidal Thoughts***

Once the youth's safety is protected, staff may listen to the youth's concerns. This may include "probing" for specific information such as asking directly if the youth is thinking about suicide, asking about the youths' risk and protective factors for suicide, or asking about their reasons for living and/or reasons for dying. It is important to remember that these are only "probes" to help the conversation and to explore suicide risk. The main objective is to listen to the youth in a non-judgmental way.

### ***Assessing the Youth's Suicide Risk and Needs for Help***

If the youth has disclosed thoughts or behaviors about suicide, it becomes important to assess for the youth's level of suicide risk. This may be done informally by staffs who are trying to gather immediate information about risk (e.g. Is there a Suicide Plan? Suicide Means?), or formally by designated staff (e.g. Mental Status Exam given by Psychologist). Staff members also begin to engage the youth in conversation about their needs for help.

### ***Networking with Community Helpers to Protect the Youth from Suicide***

In Juvenile Justice Communities, staff members may have highly specialized roles in helping a youth who is at risk for suicide. For example, a policy may state that Security Officers are primarily responsible for keeping the youth physically safe, whereas the on-site Psychologist is primarily responsible for assessing risk and developing a treatment/response plan. In this context of the organization's policies and protocols, staff members "Network" with community helpers to assist the youth, protect the youth from suicide, and build resiliency to future suicide risk.

If you have any questions or need further guidance, feel free to contact Lygia Williams at [Lygia.williams@tn.gov](mailto:Lygia.williams@tn.gov)  
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