

Georgia Commission on Family Violence Support for Survivors of Murder-Suicide Suggested Community Protocol

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE MURDER-SUICIDE IS A PREVALENT PROBLEM

A domestic violence murder-suicide occurs when a person kills one or more victims, including a current or former intimate partner, and then completes suicide. Most domestic violence murder-suicides occur in the home, and sometimes children are present or are witness to the death(s) of their parent(s). Every year in Georgia, there are an average of 20 domestic violence murder-suicides, leaving behind hundreds of family members and friends. Despite the far-reaching impact of these incidents, survivors of domestic violence murder-suicide are often unaware of services available to them after the incident. In the case of a murder-suicide incident, a “survivor” is someone who has lost a loved one to murder-suicide.

From 2004-2018, the work of the Georgia Domestic Violence Fatality Review Project (the Project) shed light on the issue of domestic violence murder-suicide, a prominent problem which was hidden in plain sight. The Project’s in-depth reviews of domestic violence-related deaths yielded hundreds of recommendations to address gaps in the systemic response to domestic violence statewide. Thirty-nine percent of the cases reviewed by the Project were classified as attempted or completed murder-suicides. The Project’s 2016 Annual Report focused solely on the overlaps of domestic violence homicide and suicide risk, identified missed opportunities to intervene prior to murder-suicide incidents, along with the need to bolster services both before and after domestic violence-related murder-suicide incidents. The 2016 Annual Report can be viewed online at georgiafatalityreview.com/reports/report/2016-report.

During 2017, GCFV launched the Support for Survivors of Murder-Suicide (SSMS) Project to provide support, resources and referrals to survivors of domestic violence murder-suicide in Georgia. Working closely with Family Violence Task Forces (Task Forces) and other partners, GCFV’s SSMS Project Coordinator tracks all domestic violence-related murder-suicide incidents that occur in Georgia and attempts to connect surviving family members, friends, and the community with local services. The goal of the SSMS Project is to develop a statewide outreach program to link survivors of murder-suicide to the many services they need: financial services, the Georgia Crime Victims Compensation Program, advocacy and case management, grief counseling and parenting support. More about the SSMS Project can be located online at gcfv.georgia.gov/support-survivors-murder-suicide.

SURVIVORS OF MURDER-SUICIDE NEED COMMUNITY SUPPORT

In addition to the trauma caused by a sudden loss of life in any circumstance, survivors of domestic violence murder-suicide experience further difficulties. Surviving children, for example, not only lose their victim parent, but often both parents simultaneously. Children who experience this type of loss grapple with the complicated grief which comes along with losing their parents suddenly and tragically. They may feel angry and confused as they try to comprehend how one parent or caregiver could take the other’s life. They may feel conflicted as they experience anger and blame towards the perpetrator, combined with the love they have for them as a parent. Conversely, they may blame the victim for doing something, or not doing something, to “cause” their own death.

Beyond children, the circle of survivors extends to parents of the deceased, siblings, other family members, friends, coworkers, and even service providers and responders who were connected to the victim or offender. Following a murder-suicide, these individuals may be confronted with several situations which they may find overwhelming. Survivors may be asked to speak with law enforcement, identify the bodies of the deceased, talk with the media,

visit the crime scene, arrange for the crime scene to be cleaned, prepare for the funeral(s), claim the personal effects of the deceased, handle their estate, and even render care for surviving children.

In the wake of a domestic violence murder-suicide, it is not uncommon for these survivors to question their own role in the circumstances and what they may have been able to do differently to change the outcome. A murder-suicide can shatter the equilibrium in the life of a survivor. Losing a loved one, particularly in a sudden and violent manner, can be traumatic. For many, losing two loved ones at the same time in such a manner can exacerbate and complicate the grieving process.

Interviews with surviving family members conducted by the Georgia Domestic Violence Fatality Review Project revealed most families were still deeply struggling with their grief and the aftermath of the loss, years later. Surviving family members repeatedly disclosed that, in most cases where children witnessed or were present at the time of the homicide, they rarely received specialized trauma interventions, grief counseling, or other necessary wraparound services. New caregivers often cited a lack of financial resources and lack of information about existing resources as barriers to children receiving follow-up services. That appears particularly true in cases of murder-suicide, after which surviving family members often lack a connection to supportive resources and counseling. This gap is due in part to the fact that, because the perpetrator died by suicide, there is no prosecution and family members do not receive the assistance of Victim Witness Assistance Programs. In many communities, prosecution-based advocates are the primary connection to services such as referrals to counseling and the Georgia Crime Victims' Compensation Program.

When a murder-suicide occurs, survivors come into contact with individuals capable of bridging the gap to supportive services via faith organizations, funeral homes, hospitals, law enforcement, schools, employers, neighbors, and friends to name a few. All of these individuals make up the survivor's community -- including you. Task Forces have an opportunity to support these survivors and encourage them to seek support for the trauma they have experienced, whether it is direct or vicarious.

SUGGESTED COMMUNITY PROTOCOL FOR RESPONDING TO MURDER-SUICIDE

This community protocol was created to equip communities to respond to survivors of murder-suicide incidents. The response from individual communities should be uniform and coordinated among community members, volunteers and service providers. Duties and responsibilities should be clearly defined between all parties involved. This protocol does not offer a definitive set of responses for every possible situation a community may face, rather, it provides a framework for developing effective strategies to respond to these incidents, and practical tools to support survivors of murder-suicide.

PROTOCOL OF RESPONSE

A. Planning Phase

Working collaboratively in your community to plan your coordinated response to a murder-suicide incident is necessary given the complicated dynamics of trauma, grief, and crisis response. While any helpful response designed to support survivors is better than no response, a well planned community protocol increases the likelihood that your community will connect with survivors in meaningful and helpful ways.

- a. Obtain training for your Task Force on the subject of domestic violence murder-suicide**
Consider requesting a training by GCFV staff for your Task Force, focused on the homicide-suicide connection and the SSMS Project, to grow support for your protocol.
- b. Gather resources and information available to survivors via GCFV's SSMS Project**

Reach out to the SSMS Project Coordinator at GCFV and request materials to be kept in case of a murder-suicide in your community. Helpful materials provided by GCFV include:

- Support for Survivors of Domestic Violence Murder-Suicide Brochure
- Fact Sheets for Survivors
- Resource List

Digital versions of these resources as well as additional information is available online at gcfv.georgia.gov/support-survivors-murder-suicide.

c. Identify an SSMS Liaison to act as a point person for your Task Force in the event of a murder-suicide incident

The SSMS Liaison will gather all relevant information related to a murder-suicide that occurs in your community and share it with the Task Force. The SSMS Liaison will also be responsible for coordinating efforts with GCFV's SSMS Project Coordinator.

The SSMS Liaison should be notified by Task Force members in the event of a murder-suicide in the community. The SSMS Liaison will gather information including the:

- Date of the murder-suicide incident
- Names and ages of all victims and the perpetrator
- Names and ages of children (if applicable)
- Location where the murder-suicide took place and the location of residence if different

The SSMS Liaison should also attempt to determine if any Task Force members have an established connection to the victim(s) or perpetrator and/or any known survivors.

d. Establish a plan to connect with survivors

Connecting with the survivors of murder-suicide will be important for linking them with helping resources. The connection may be easier if someone on the Task Force already has a connection to the surviving family members.

The SSMS Liaison should draft an email to Task Force members to determine if a pre-existing connection exists. Within the body of the email, ask if any members know the victim(s) and perpetrator or any of their family members. If the murder-suicide was covered by local news, include relevant links and information pertaining to the case for ease of reference.

Remember: When a murder-suicide occurs in your community, it is likely Task Force members may know the victim(s) and/or perpetrator professionally or personally. This means it is possible you might be supporting your colleagues and connecting them with services and support, as well.

- i. If someone knows the victim(s), perpetrator, or survivor(s), have that individual approach the survivor(s) on behalf of the Task Force and community. This should be done as soon as possible, ideally within seven days of identifying the connection to the survivor(s), to ensure the survivor is connected with services as soon as possible. However, if more time has passed, it is still important to make contact with survivors expeditiously.
- ii. If no one has an established connection to the victim(s), perpetrator, or survivor(s), look for other ways to connect:
 - Do any Task Force members know someone who worked with them?
 - Do any Task Force members' children attend the same school as them?

- Do any Task Force members have a connection to them through a church, a social group, social media or sports team?

Establish a person within your Task Force (this can be the SSMS Liaison or another selected member) who will reach out to survivors, in the event that a pre-existing connection does not exist. Consider the individual's personality, professional affiliation, trauma expertise or other relevant factors as you make your selection for this role.

e. Test your protocol

It is not necessary to wait for a murder-suicide incident to occur in your community to test your protocol. Plan a test-run. Have your Task Force and SSMS Liaison on the lookout for the occurrence of a murder-suicide somewhere in the state. Once identified, go about the steps you have established in your plan without actually making contact with survivors. Have a discussion with your Task Force about how you would handle your response, if the same incident had occurred in your community. Ensure that you have all of the resources gathered that you would be prepared to offer any identified survivors. Take stock of what was missing or any information that was difficult to locate and use the opportunity to on-board new partners for your protocol.

With the assistance of the SSMS Project Coordinator, your Task Force may also be encouraged to reach out to stakeholders in the area where the incident occurred to encourage them to establish contact with the survivors -- and develop a protocol of their own, if one has not been established in their community.

B. Implementation Phase

Now that your Task Force has a protocol for what to do in the event of a murder-suicide incident, you must be prepared to take action to support survivors.

a. Establish a connection with the survivor(s)

While developing your protocol, your Task Force planned to establish a connection with survivors. After determining if your Task Force has members with a pre-existing relationship with the survivor(s) or if you will utilize your identified team member to make contact, reach out to the survivor(s) to introduce services

- i. Introduce bereavement companionship at this stage (see Attachment A).
- ii. Complete the Assessment Worksheet with the survivor(s) (see Attachment B).
- iii. Provide the survivor(s) with information about the Crime Victims Compensation Program and offer to assist them with completing the application.
Remember: You can always refer the survivor(s) to someone who is familiar with filling out the Crime Victims Compensation Program application, such as a prosecution-based advocate or the SSMS Project Coordinator.
- iv. Provide the survivor(s) with other resources and referrals locally available to them such as grief and loss counselors or the domestic violence program. GCFV keeps an updated list of resources available online at gcfv.georgia.gov/support-survivors-murder-suicide.
- v. Provide SSMS Project brochure and fact sheets to the survivor(s). One-page factsheets are available for download at gcfv.georgia.gov/support-survivors-murder-suicide and cover the following topics:
 - Childhood Traumatic Grief and Domestic Violence Murder-Suicide

- Children's Responses After a Domestic Violence Murder-Suicide
- Domestic Violence Murder-Suicide and Animal Survivors
- Family Dynamics Following a Domestic Violence Murder-Suicide
- Helpful Books (for Children and Adolescents, and for Adults)
- Helpful Resources (for Caregivers, for Children and Adolescents, Bereavement Camps)
- How to Help Children Heal After Domestic Violence Murder-Suicide
- Probating an Estate After a Domestic Violence Murder-Suicide
- Self-Care and Healing for Caregivers After Domestic Violence Murder-Suicide
- Self-Care and Healing for Children After Domestic Violence Murder-Suicide
- Talking to Children About Domestic Violence Murder-Suicide

b. Update the SSMS Project Coordinator

Please keep the SSMS Coordinator throughout the time you are utilizing your protocol, and particularly as you establish contact with survivors and implement services. You can reach the SSMS Project Coordinator, Kylee Elliott, for technical assistance and ongoing support throughout your efforts.

Kylee Elliott, Support for Survivors of Murder-Suicide Project Coordinator
 Georgia Commission on Family Violence
 Phone: (404) 657-3412
 Fax: (404) 656-3987
 Web: gcfv.georgia.gov/support-survivors-murder-suicide

C. Followup Phase

Your Task Force has now successfully followed its protocol and established contact with one or more survivors of murder-suicide. Congratulations! Your community is playing a vital role in improving the coordinated response to domestic violence murder-suicide statewide. The study of these incidents and numerous interviews with survivors has revealed several best practices which should also be considered in conducting followup to a murder-suicide incident:

a. Continued support

Survivors will likely need long-term support and assistance. This support can come through local organizations, faith-based services, and other community-based services. Task Forces should assemble a list of local service providers that will be available for the survivors. Long-term support can also include reaching out during holidays and other designated times, such as the anniversary of the murder-suicide or birthdays of victims, to assure the survivor that they are not forgotten. A reminder card of yearly grief camps can be sent to the caregivers raising child survivors to ensure they are aware of these services.

b. Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a key component of ongoing advocacy and support. Consider including an advocate who qualifies for [privilege](#) to serve as the SSMS Liaison or to make follow-up contacts. It is imperative that survivors know the SSMS Liaison or other designated contact will not share the information discussed with the survivor. A release of information will need to be signed when any information is shared.

c. Crisis intervention plan

Survivors of murder-suicide as well as those who support them are grappling to understand an often incomprehensible and heartbreaking experience; the emotional and psychological impact can sometimes lead to the need for crisis intervention. Task Forces and community members should receive training on crisis intervention and create a crisis intervention plan. A referral list with crisis lines should be made available to community members and survivors (see Attachment C).

Attachments

- A. Bereavement Companionship
- B. Assessment Worksheet
- C. Suicide Focused Resources

Bereavement Companionship

Bereavement companionship is the art of bringing comfort to another person, by becoming familiar with their stories, their experiences, and their needs. The bereavement companionship process occurs in three steps:

1. Find out what the survivor needs
2. Help the survivor meet their needs
3. Know your limitations as a companion

Find Out What the Survivor Needs

Assisting a survivor effectively requires a mindset that remains survivor-centered. This means that you must take steps to address the actual needs of the survivor, rather than what you perceive their needs to be. Asking questions such as, “What does the survivor need?” and “How can I find out what the survivor needs?” are imperative.

Many bereavement companions find the use of an assessment worksheet to be helpful in their efforts to determine the survivor’s needs. As you begin the worksheet (Attachment B), consider the use of open-ended questions including:

- What comforts you during this difficult time?
- What concerns you most today?
- What else is going on in your life at this time?
- What is going on in the child(ren)’s life at this time?
- Tell me about your life since the death.
- Who can you identify as someone you can talk with?
- Are they available when you need them?

Help the Survivor Meet Their Needs

As you complete the worksheet, you can ask follow up questions to address specific needs of the survivor including:

- Are you aware of or have you contacted the Crime Victims Compensation Program?
- Are you interested in a grief and loss support group?
- Are the children in need of counseling or a grief camp?
- Will you need to probate the estate?
- Were there any animal survivors?

After obtaining information on needs identified by the survivor, every effort should be made to match them with a resource or support to meet that need.

Know Your Limitations as a Companion

Bereavement companions work to create conditions for healing to take place in the survivor. The ultimate responsibility for eventual healing lies within the person. Make sure you connecting the bereaved person to

other sources of support and encouraging their connections with other people. Bereavement companions must remember to be responsible *to* bereaved people, not responsible *for* them. Excellent self-care is essential for bereavement companions, as it provides the physical, spiritual, emotional, social and cognitive renewal necessary to be an effective, ongoing companion in grief.

Some suggestions for your practice of self-care:

- Take breaks, set boundaries, and check in with others.
- Identify your support system. Reach out for help with you need it.
- Deliberately set aside time for yourself. Have a sacred place for yourself where you can be quiet and spend time with yourself without worry for others, such as the survivor you are companioning.
- Discover that one thing that brings you joy and interact with it daily, if possible.
- Find something that helps you express yourself: music, photography, art, gardening or journaling. Try taking a new class or trying a new hobby.

ATTACHMENT B



Assessing a Survivor's Needs

This assessment sheet can be used as a part of your community's response protocol following an incident of domestic violence-related murder-suicide. For more information about services and support available to survivors of murder-suicide, please contact the Georgia Commission on Family Violence's Support for Survivors of Murder-Suicide Program and visit gcfv.georgia.gov/support-survivors-murder-suicide.

Name of Survivor: _____ Name of Person Completing Assessment: _____

SUPPORT ITEM	SURVIVOR NEED?	SUPPORT NEEDED	SUPPORT AVAILABLE	REFERRED/ COMPLETED?
Counseling	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	<i>Help finding local therapist to process grief</i>	<i>Behavioral Health Clinic, Traumatic Grief Fact Sheet</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Crime Victims Compensation Program	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Grief and Loss Support Group	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		Traumatic Grief & Murder-Suicide Fact Sheet	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Suicide Support Group	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Counseling	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		Family Dynamics After Murder-Suicide Fact Sheet	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Counseling for Children	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		How to Help Children Heal & Talking to Children About Murder-Suicide Fact Sheets	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Grief Camp for Children	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		Self-Care & Healing for Children Fact Sheet	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Understanding Trauma in Children	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		Children's Responses After Murder-Suicide Fact Sheet	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Probate of Estate	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		Probate Court After Murder-Suicide Fact Sheet	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Guardianship/Custody	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Financial Assistance	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Social Security/Survivor Benefits	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Animal Survivors	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		Animal Survivors of Murder-Suicide Fact Sheet	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Self-Care	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		Self-Care & Healing for Caregivers & Families Fact Sheet	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Help Remembering Tasks	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
NOTES:				

SUICIDE-FOCUSED RESOURCES

PHONE

- 1) The **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** provides free and confidential emotional support to people in a suicidal crisis or emotional distress. By calling **1-800-273-TALK (8255)** you'll be connected to a skilled, trained counselor at a crisis center in your area, anytime 24/7.
- 2) The **National Hopeline Network: 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2443)**
- 3) **IMALIVE Hotline:** If you (or someone you know) are depressed and thinking about suicide, please call **1-800-442-HOPE (4673)** to talk to a caring crisis hotline volunteer. Your call is free and confidential.
- 4) The **Georgia Crisis & Access Line (GCAL)** is staffed with professional social workers and counselors 24 hours per day, every day to assist those with urgent and emergency needs. Call **1-800-715-4225**.
- 5) The **Trevor Lifeline** is the nation's only around-the-clock crisis intervention and suicide prevention lifeline for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth. Call **1-866-488-7386**. [Note for those referring: the lifeline will talk with any individual regardless of sexuality or gender.]
- 6) The **Your Life Your Voice Youth Helpline** is an anonymous, free 24-hour helpline. If you are having thoughts of harming yourself or you are being abused, please call us at **1-800-448-3000**. These are serious issues that are best handled in one-on-one conversations with counselors. Always Open! Counselors are ready for your call 24/7.
- 7) **Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network (RAINN):** RAINN.org is a free, confidential and secure crisis hotline 24/7 for victims of sexual assault or violence as well as their friends and families. Call **1-800-656-HOPE (4673)**.
- 8) **Vets4Warriors:** for all service members, veterans, and their families. Confidential and anonymous. Available 24/7. Live answer and personalized peer support by a veteran.

ONLINE CHAT

- 1) The **Lifeline Crisis Chat** is available through the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. The service is available within the United States and territories from 2pm to 2am Eastern Time seven days a week. Visit the website **www.crisischat.org** and click on the **"Chat Now" tab**.
- 2) **IMAlive** is a free, confidential and secure online chat service that provides live help to people in crisis. All chats are answered by trained volunteers, all of whom use the pseudonym Alex. **Visit www.hopeline.com to begin chatting.**

3) **TrevorChat**: a free, confidential, and secure online instant messaging service that provides live help by trained volunteers. Available 7 days a week between 3:00pm - 9:00pm ET/12:00pm - 6:00pm PT. Visit the website www.thetrevorproject.org to begin chatting.

TEXT MESSAGING

1) **TrevorText** - Text "Trevor" to **1-202-304-1200**. Standard text messaging rates apply. Available on Thursdays and Fridays between 4:00pm - 8:00pm EST/1:00pm - 5:00pm PT

2) **Crisis Text Line** serves anyone, in any type of crisis, providing access to free, 24/7 support and information via the medium people already use and trust: text. Here's how it works: **Text START to 741-741** from anywhere in the USA, anytime, about any type of crisis. A live, trained Crisis Counselor receives the text and responds quickly.

WEBSITES OF INTEREST

1) **Suicide Prevention Action Network, Georgia** (SPAN-GA) operates with a focus on creating public awareness and public/political will to provide resources to implement the Georgia State Suicide Prevention Plan. www.span-ga.org

2) **Georgia Suicide Prevention Information Network** (GSPIN) is your community web site for suicide prevention, intervention and aftercare information. www.gspin.org

3) **National Alliance on Mental Illness, Georgia** (NAMI) seeks to create communities where all affected by mental illnesses find hope, help, and acceptance through support, education and advocacy. www.namiga.org

4) **Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities**, Suicide Prevention Program (DBHDD) <https://dbhdd.georgia.gov/suicide-prevention>

5) **Camp SOS** provides a camp for families that have lost a loved one to suicide. www.campsos.com

6) **The Link** Counseling Center and National Resource Center is a nonprofit community counseling center that provides quality, affordable, confidential counseling, psychotherapy, and support groups to all ages. www.thelink.org

7) **Georgia Collaborative ASO** facilitates the delivery of whole-health, person-centered and culturally sensitive supports and services to individuals and their families through the state. <http://www.georgiacollaborative.com/>