

“No death by suicide is acceptable.”

A Personal Statement from Texas State Suicide Prevention Coordinator Jenna Heise

My uncle died by suicide three months into my role as the suicide prevention officer for the State of Texas. As a self-proclaimed “Zero Suicide” advocate and a champion in my community and state, I struggled with the reality that despite all of my knowledge and best efforts, I had personally lost a loved one to suicide. Sadly, I have lost others to suicide prior to my role in suicide prevention. However, losing someone once you have been deemed an “expert” stings in a different way. That I had walked into a fragmented system that was confusing to access provided me little comfort.

I began asking myself how I could reconcile this great loss and my own place in it. How would I go back to work and look my coworkers in the eye when they looked to me to be the subject matter expert? I wondered how I could be good at my job if I could not even save one of my own. Do I even have any credibility now? And yet, I had learned some things from this experience. I decided to whole-heartedly commit myself to improving our system.

Prior to working as a suicide prevention officer for the state, I worked as a therapist, counselor and administrator in numerous state hospitals and community mental health centers. When I began my new position in suicide prevention, I wondered how we would make any sense of the system or measure any successes. Watching my uncle struggle daily, had compelled me to reach out to the suicide prevention coordinator in the county where my uncle lived and ask about their services. I learned that mobile crisis teams offered on-the-spot evaluations to individuals in distress. We saved my uncle three times, before he ultimately took his life. Understanding how to access services was a key issue for my family, so my office created [a ten minute video](#) explaining how to access services and care in our state. We hoped this would be helpful for those who might experience the same devastation my family and I went through.

A few months later, the paper “[Suicide Care in Systems Framework](#)” was released. Having surveyed the state’s needs, the problem came alive for me in those pages. In contrast to other research I had read, this approach had tangible recommendations and presented a framework that I intuitively believed and understood. I reached out to the authors of the report, who were members of the Clinical Care and Interventions Task Force of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention, and invited them to speak to the Behavioral Health Directors of our 39 community mental health centers across Texas.

Wow! I did not know what was in store for our state. The fire that had begun to slowly burn in me and others ignited into the aspirational goal of Zero Suicides in Texas! No longer would we think of suicide prevention as **fewer** deaths, but rather **no** deaths.

Now there is a deep commitment in Texas among providers, and others in the community who have joined me on this journey, to ensuring that no one else will die on our watch! That means that at all levels of care throughout our entire system there will be no one left to chance. We will use the best possible screening and risk assessments. We will help people be safer by collaborating with those at risk to create a meaningful safety plan. By training 100-percent of our workforce, we will ensure that they are competent and confident to intervene to prevent risk and death. We will use the best practices for treatment, triage, continuity of care, and enhanced follow up practices. We will embed and institutionalize policies and procedures to support not only the people at risk, but their families and the workforce. We will use our data to identify gaps in the system and strive to fill them. We will save lives systematically and thoughtfully by improving our system as a whole.

This tool kit is designed to help you support our goal of Zero Suicides in Texas. It contains the information and resources you need to achieve our goals and ensure that no one else in our care dies by suicide.

In my heart of hearts I know that I did all that I could for my uncle and my family. Perhaps the only peace I will be able to share with others as a survivor of loss is that if I can go through this process and survive, so can others. I pledge to continue fighting to improve our system so that no one experiences pain so deep that suicide is the only option.

I hope you will use this tool kit to join me in saying no death by suicide is acceptable.

Not on my watch.

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