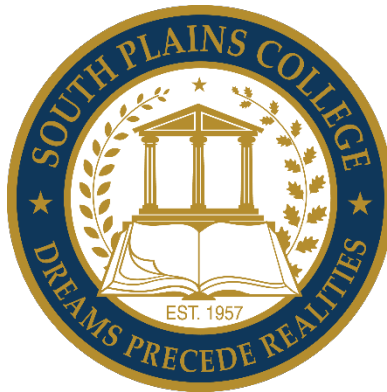


# Student Death Protocol

## South Plains College



Implementation: 11/2/2022

*These guidelines are intended to assist South Plains College employees with addressing student related crises in accordance with SPC Policy FZ – Student Death. While some SPC officials play more active roles in responding to student crises, it is important for all SPC employees to have a working knowledge of these guidelines. Although the College strives to respond in a consistent manner, the specific facts and circumstances of any crisis may lead the College to adjust the actions suggested in these guidelines.*

*Acknowledgements:*  
Appalachian State University

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## HOW TO RESPOND TO A STUDENT DEATH

South Plains College intends to provide a safe and positive environment for all students. When tragedy does occur, it is incumbent upon SPC to respond in a sensitive and caring manner, recognizing that individuals respond in different ways to different circumstances that may surround a death. The death of a student affects the entire SPC community, as well as the family and friends of the deceased. Considering the very sensitive and unpredictable nature of a death, no policy or protocol can describe in complete detail all the steps that must be taken. These guidelines are designed to help faculty, professional staff, administrators, and other College employees respond to the death of a student in a cohesive manner.

All deaths on SPC facilities will be investigated by SPC Police Department to determine if there are any signs of possible foul play. The area where the deceased is found will be treated as a crime scene and no one, especially the media, will be permitted in the area until such time as police and medical officials approve.

**Do not disturb the death scene.** Remember that, unless rendering first aid, it is extremely important not to disturb a death scene. Therefore, exit the area immediately. If possible, secure the area in question, being careful to touch as little as possible. If there is another person with you, one of you should stay at the scene to keep others from tampering with the death scene while the other calls the police.

**Under no circumstances should employees make any comment or statement about the cause of death.** Under the State of Texas law, only a medical examiner has authority to determine the cause and manner of a death that is not attended by medical personnel and other types of death, including but not limited to deaths that might reasonably have been due to a violent or traumatic injury or accident. **In the event of the death of a student, all requests for information from news media personnel should be referred to the Executive Director of Marketing and Communication at (806) 716-2210.** At no time should any employee involved discuss the incident with any persons not directly responding to the situation. For more information about interaction with the media, please see Media Guidelines below.

## GUIDELINES

- 1) Call SPC Police Department at the location where incident occurred:

Levelland (806) 891-8883

Reese Center (806) 893-5705

Lubbock Career & Technology Center (806) 241-1516

Lubbock Downtown Center (806) 716-2999

Plainview Center (806) 716-2911]

If not on SPC property call 9-1-1. The police department will alert medical personnel as needed. Be prepared to report your exact location.

If the death occurs in the cities of Levelland, Lubbock, or Plainview or in Hockley, Hale, or

Lubbock Counties, SPC Police Department may be notified by the corresponding law enforcement agency. In the event another SPC official is informed of the student's death, that official must contact the SPC Police Department as soon as possible to convey the information.

- 2) Police, medical personnel or the medical examiner will contact next of kin to:
  - a) Inform them of what has happened to their student.
  - b) Answer any questions they may have about the cause of or circumstances around the death.
- 3) If a death occurs during SPC sponsored travel, the SPC employee accompanying the trip should immediately contact local emergency services and the local law enforcement agency. As soon as possible once the situation is secured, the SPC employee will contact the Dean of Students Office (806) 716-2380.
- 4) If a death occurs while a student is studying abroad:
  - a) The program leader or representative of host institution will contact the Office of Admissions and Records (806) 716-2370 and the US Embassy or Consulate.
  - b) The Vice President for Student Affairs and/or Dean of Students will activate the CARE Team to coordinate plans for dealing with the situation.
- 5) In the case of an on-SPC property death, SPC Police Department will:
  - a) Send an officer to the location immediately to secure the scene and begin an investigation
  - b) Notify the Office of Health and Wellness (806) 716-2529 or their counselor on-call when requested.
  - c) Notify the SPC Chief of Police.
  - d) Notify the Dean of Students.
- 6) As soon as possible, the Dean of Students or designee should notify the following offices by email and/or phone, or otherwise ensure that the offices have been notified of a student death.
  - a) Primary – contact as soon as possible
    - SPC Police Department
    - Student Housing (if a residential Student)
    - Office of the President
    - Vice President for Academic Affairs
    - Marketing and Communications
    - Director of Health and Wellness (counseling services)
    - Associate Director of Health & Wellness (for accidental death)
    - Director of Athletics (if deceased is a student-athlete)
    - Office of Admissions and Records, College Registrar (if deceased is an international student or student abroad)
  - b) Secondary – contact as soon as practical
    - Vice President for Institutional Advancement

- Office of Student Financial Aid
  - Vice President for Business Affairs
  - Office of Admissions and Records, College Registrar
  - College Bookstore
  - General Counsel, via the College President
  - Others as appropriate
- 7) The Dean of Students Office will convene the CARE Team including the Executive Director of Marketing and Communications as soon as possible. Others may be pulled in, as appropriate, on a case-by-case basis. These offices will work together to make sure SPC responds to the death in a unified manner. CARE Team will reconvene within a month of postvention activities being implemented to examine the effectiveness of the response and explore issues that could have been handled better.
  - 8) The Dean of Students Office will try to contact those close to the student and notify them about the death before any location- or SPC-wide announcement is made if one is deemed necessary. This includes roommates, friends, and other sub-groups the student might be a member of (e.g., athletic team, student group). Because these students will not know when family will be notified, these groups should be encouraged to limit early social media communication, and to recognize that any such communications could be insensitive and painful to the surviving family.
  - 9) SPC Police will send out a SPC Safety Alert only if it is determined there is an on- going threat to the SPC community.
  - 10) As soon as is practical, the Vice President for Student Affairs, in consultation with the CARE Team, in coordination with Marketing and Communications, will determine what, if any, notifications will be made to the SPC community. In most circumstances, location-wide notifications will not be made, but instead affinity groups will be contacted. Affinity groups are identified individuals and groups at a SPC location that may have interacted or known the deceased, such as their residence hall, their classmates, their teammates, their professors, etc. In the event location specific communications are made:
    - a) Cause of death is not released through email notifications.
    - b) Official information cannot be conveyed until the family is notified.
    - c) When the SPC location is talking about a death by suicide amongst themselves, whether or not this death has officially been declared a suicide, the Dean of Students Office should explain to the family that SPC leaders may be encouraged to talk about suicide and its causes in order to help keep students safe. The identity of a student who has died by suicide does not have to be shared in these conversations about suicide.
  - 11) For on-SPC property deaths, the Office of Health and Wellness, Student Housing and the Dean of Students Office will facilitate face-to-face meetings with students who lived in the same building of the deceased.
    - a) In the case of a suicide, it is a natural impulse for survivors to want a simple reason as to why a suicide happened and this might involve blaming someone close to the deceased. Interventions should involve an explanation of the complexity of suicide. Factors that

may contribute to suicide are found in Appendix B.

- 12) The CARE Team will arrange to have a “Grieving Room” in the student center or specified location at other SPC locations. This room is intended to be a place where students can come and gather to grieve with their peers. This room will be staffed with at least one counselor from the Health and Wellness Center and other staff as needed.
  - a) Entry to the grieving room will be limited to members of the deceased’s family, faculty, staff and students. Members of the public will be allowed entry only upon invitation of the family or vice president for student affairs.
  - b) Media, including student media, will not be allowed access to the “Grieving Room.”
- 13) The CARE Team will coordinate support offered to groups affected by the death, such as the student’s friends. In the case of a death by suicide, it is important to remember that those with psychiatric illnesses such as depression, severe substance abuse, severe personality disorders and psychosis, or those who have previously lost someone to suicide or experienced/are experiencing suicidal thoughts themselves, even if not connected to the deceased, may also have a difficult time managing grief and emotions. An effort should be made to also connect with these students, whenever possible. Do not rely on high-risk individuals seeking help on their own, but instead be pro-active and reach out to them. Examples of high-risk groups are found in Appendix C.

Outreach services will be provided, as appropriate, by units such as Student Housing, the Office of Health and Wellness, the Office of Disability Services, the Office of Student Life and Activities, and other offices. Outreach services should address the following points:

#### **For Students**

- a) Make timely contact with friends of the deceased student.
  - Have a face-to-face meeting with close friends to provide more specific and detailed information, such as information about funeral services.
- b) Encourage expression of feelings.
- c) Promote peer support among friends of the victim.
- e) Avoid glamorization of death by suicide.
  - Do not hold special memorials.
  - Do not normalize suicide as a typical response to distressing life circumstances.
  - Do not present the act as unexplainable.
  - Do not talk in detail about the suicide method.
  - Do not portray suicide as the result of a single or simple problem.
  - Do not portray suicide as a heroic, noble or romantic act.
- f) Encourage resumption of routine as soon as possible.

#### **For Family**

The Dean of Students Office or the assigned primary contact will assist families with the following:

- a) Accommodate as necessary. This may include providing appropriate housing arrangements for parents and/or other family members visiting SPC.

- b) Offer pastoral care when requested.
  - c) Offer brief counseling when requested.
    - The Office of Health and Wellness can provide a couple of crisis intervention sessions to family members in the immediate aftermath of a student death if requested. On-going longer-term counseling cannot be provided but help with referrals for on-going long-term counseling is something that could be provided.
  - d) Provide assistance in concluding College business (i.e., gathering the student's personal effects). In this, as in all instances, sensitivity to the family's wishes and requests will be paramount.
- 14) The President or designated official will send out an initial letter of condolence to the parents.
- 15) Responding to the death of a student is a challenging undertaking. Those affected by the death of the student are encouraged to seek help as needed. Faculty and staff may receive free counseling by contacting the Employee Assistance Program (806)743-1327. Students may contact the Office of Health and Wellness (806) 716-2529.

## **FACULTY GUIDELINES**

- 1) Faculty members should expect to be approached by students affected by the death. These students may ask that they be allowed to miss class and/or postpone some of their academic responsibilities. In this case, the faculty member should refer the student to the dean of students or the center dean or director. It is important to facilitate the grieving process as well as stabilize the environment by reducing the highly emotional tone of the SPC community, bringing it back to its more ordinary state.
  - a) Handle each request on a case-by case basis.
  - b) Classes can only be cancelled by the instructor in coordination with the department chair and the instructional dean.
- 2) Along with other members of the SPC community, faculty members can play an important role in helping students who are struggling with the loss of a friend or classmate. Suggestions for faculty to support students in crises following a death are as follows:
  - a) Faculty may talk about/recognize the loss in class. If uncertain about how to lead a discussion in class, consult with the Office of the Dean of Students or the Health and Wellness Center.
  - b) Remind students who are struggling about free counseling in Health and Wellness.
  - c) Extend an assignment deadline.
  - d) Provide make-up work or examinations.
  - e) Offer to meet with the student to provide extra assistance with assignments.
  - f) Identify tutoring services as needed.
  - g) Facilitate a leave of absence or medical withdrawal if that becomes necessary.

## MEDIA GUIDELINES

- 1) Out of respect for their families and those closest to students who have died, South Plains College does not release a list of names or link cause of death to individuals. It is important to note that under State law, the College must rely on a medical examiner to determine an official cause of death, and when a death occurs other SPC locations the College may not be informed of the cause. From working with students' families and others affected by a loss of life, we learn much that alerts us to areas of concern and greatly informs how we provide health and safety support, as well as grief support and resources, for our community.

At South Plains College, we choose to define our students by the unique contributions each person brings to our community. We believe each member of our community should be remembered for the contributions they made in life.

- 2) The Executive Director for Marketing and Communication (806) 716-2210 will be responsible for collecting and disseminating information to the media. All media requests for information should be directed to this office. The Executive Director will work with SPC Police Department, the Vice President for Student Affairs, the President, and general counsel, if applicable, to maintain the accuracy and ensure the legality of the information disseminated.
- 3) In Hockley County and Hale County the Justice of the Peace and in Lubbock County the medical examiner has authority to determine the cause and manner of a death that is not attended by medical personnel and other types of death, including but not limited to deaths that might reasonably have been due to a violent or traumatic injury or accident ([Texas Code of Criminal Procedures, Art. 49.04](#)). Accordingly, no person involved in the College's response to a student death will speculate as to the cause of death or make statements assigning responsibility for the cause of death.

College personnel, including marketing and communications staff, in response to media inquiries, will not address causes of student deaths.

- 4) Marketing and communications will prepare a written statement about the event that can be read or submitted to the media, if necessary. Students, parents, and employees are discouraged from making comments or giving interviews to the media.

Marketing and communications will emphasize postvention services and resources that assist the SPC community to regain normalcy in media statements and responses.

- 5) In instances in which a "Grieving Room" is established, media will not be allowed.
- 6) Media restrictions apply to members of student media. It is recognized that students who are also members of student media organizations may also be affected by student deaths at SPC. South Plains College students, therefore, will not be excluded from any media-restricted events provided they do not represent media outlets and/or attempt event coverage of any kind, including note taking, interviews, photography and videography, while in attendance.



## GENERAL COMMUNICATIONS GUIDELINES

Marketing and communications will ensure consistent and accurate dissemination of communications. The following guidelines will be communicated in cases in which public inquiry is expected:

- 1) In cases of phone calls, individuals should be told their concerns have been noted and will be forwarded to the most appropriate college administrators. If they would like to leave their names and contact information, that will be shared as well. They should not be promised they will get a return call or response, but politely let them know their conversation will be shared appropriately. Record the caller's information, a brief summary of the concerns, and send the info to [info@southplainscollege.edu](mailto:info@southplainscollege.edu).
- 2) In the case of emails, these should be forwarded to [info@southplainscollege.edu](mailto:info@southplainscollege.edu). Please note, it is likely responses will only be sent to individuals who have been verified as having a direct connection to the university, and who are asking a specific question.
- 3) Employees and students should not respond to non-SPC social media posts. If SPC receives messages via the official "SPC" social media accounts, they will be handled on a case-by-case basis. If there are questions or concerns about any posts on the social media sites not managed by marketing and communications, please call the (806) 716-2210.

## MEMORIAL GUIDELINES

South Plains College does not promote, participate in, or encourage individual memorials on SPC property.

- 1) For students who are seeking a way to honor the deceased, fundraising or other community service activities should be encouraged.
- 2) When a well-known student has died, it is common for informal "memorial" groups or meetings to develop spontaneously (such as candlelight vigils). Spontaneous memorials are not to be recognized in any official College communications.

If College personnel are made aware that an informal memorial is occurring, in the interest of student safety and in consultation with the Office of the Dean of Students or center dean or director, a staff member will reach out to the organizers of the event and offer guidance. Language used in a memorial setting can have the unintended consequence of adding to the attractiveness of death for vulnerable individuals seeking peace or escape through death. The purpose of staff guidance is to increase awareness of safe messaging in to help protect any vulnerable individuals who may be in attendance at these informal memorials.

## **APPENDIX A - RESOURCES**

Resources can be found under the Community Resources section at the following site <https://www.southplainscollege.edu/health/studenthealth.php> or by contacting the Health and Wellness Center directly.

## **APPENDIX B – FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO SUICIDE**

### **Factors that May Contribute to Suicide**

- Relationships or failure at relationship
- Family issues
- Psychiatric diagnoses
- Substance use or abuse
- Constitutional/genetic predisposition/family history
- Illogical thinking processes/psychosis
- Conscious and unconscious psychological processes or conflicts
- Bottled-up anger directed at oneself
- Religious, social, or cultural beliefs or values potentially leading to guilt and/or shame

## **APPENDIX C – HIGH RISK GROUPS**

### **High-Risk Groups**

- Siblings and friends
- Accidental and/or intentional first responders or individual(s) who discovered body
- Resident life staff who knew the deceased student or have dealt with other SPC tragedies
- Academic support staff/faculty who knew deceased student
- Student development staff that may have had close relationship with individual(s)
- Students who have a history of previous suicide attempts
- Students in the same residence hall
- Students in the same academic department
- Students in the same club/student activity
- Students on the same athletic team
- Student who went to the same high school or is from the same hometown as deceased
- Student who may identify in other ways with a student who has died (e.g., athletes or artists)