

National Guidelines for Behavioral Health Crisis Care

Best Practice Toolkit Executive Summary



National Guidelines for Behavioral Health Crisis Care – A Best Practice Toolkit

Knowledge Informing Transformation

The *National Guidelines for Crisis Care – A Best Practice Toolkit* advances national guidelines in crisis care within a toolkit that supports program design, development, implementation and continuous quality improvement efforts. It is intended to help mental health authorities, agency administrators, service providers, state and local leaders think through and develop the structure of crisis systems. The toolkit includes distinct sections for:

- ✓ Defining national guidelines in crisis care;
- ✓ Implementing care that aligns with national guidelines; *and*
- ✓ Evaluating alignment of systems to national guidelines.

Given the ever-expanding inclusion of the term “crisis” by entities describing service offerings that do not truly function as no-wrong-door safety net services, we start by defining what crisis services are and what they are not. Crisis services are for **anyone, anywhere and anytime**. Crisis services include (1) crisis lines accepting all calls and dispatching support based on the assessed need of the caller, (2) mobile crisis teams dispatched to wherever the need is in the community (not hospital emergency departments) and (3) crisis receiving and stabilization facilities that serve everyone that comes through their doors from all referral sources. These services are for **anyone, anywhere and anytime**.

With non-existent or inadequate crisis care, costs escalate due to an overdependence on restrictive, longer-term hospital stays, hospital readmissions, overuse of law enforcement and human tragedies that result from a lack of access to care. Extremely valuable psychiatric inpatient assets are over-burdened with referrals that might be best-supported with less intrusive, less expensive services and supports. In too many communities, the “crisis system” has been unofficially handed over to law enforcement; sometimes with devastating outcomes. The current approach to crisis care is patchwork and delivers minimal treatment for some people while others, often those who have not been engaged in care, fall through the cracks; resulting in multiple hospital readmissions, life in the criminal justice system, homelessness, early death and even suicide.

A comprehensive and integrated crisis network is the first line of defense in preventing tragedies of public and patient safety, civil rights, extraordinary and unacceptable loss of lives, and the waste of resources. There is a better way. Effective crisis care that saves lives and dollars requires a systemic approach. This toolkit will delineate how to estimate the crisis system resource needs of a community, the number of individuals who can be served within the system, the cost of crisis services, the workforce demands of implementing crisis care and the community-changing impact that can be seen when services are delivered in a manner that aligns with this Best Practice Toolkit. Readers will also learn how this approach harnesses data and technology, draws on the expertise of those with lived experience, and incorporates evidence-based suicide prevention practices.

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Core Services and Best Practices

The following represent the *National Guidelines for Crisis Care* essential elements within a **no-wrong-door** integrated crisis system:

1. **Regional Crisis Call Center:** Regional 24/7 clinically staffed hub/crisis call center that provides crisis intervention capabilities (telephonic, text and chat). Such a service should meet National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (NSPL) standards for risk assessment and engagement of individuals at imminent risk of suicide and offer quality coordination of crisis care in real-time;
2. **Crisis Mobile Team Response:** Mobile crisis teams available to reach any person in the service area in his or her home, workplace, or any other community-based location of the individual in crisis in a timely manner; *and*
3. **Crisis Receiving and Stabilization Facilities:** Crisis stabilization facilities providing short-term (under 24 hours) observation and crisis stabilization services to all referrals in a home-like, non-hospital environment.

In addition to the essential structural or programmatic elements of a crisis system, the following list of essential qualities must be “baked into” comprehensive crisis systems:

1. Addressing recovery needs, significant use of peers, and trauma-informed care;
2. “Suicide safer” care;
3. Safety and security for staff and those in crisis; *and*
4. Law enforcement and emergency medical services collaboration.

Regional Crisis Call Hub Services – *Someone To Talk To*

Regional, 24/7, clinically staffed call hub/crisis call centers provide telephonic crisis intervention services to all callers, meet National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (NSPL) operational standards regarding suicide risk assessment and engagement and offer quality coordination of crisis care in real-time. Ideally, these programs will also offer text and chat options to better engage entire communities in care. Mental health, substance use and suicide prevention lines must be equipped to take all calls with expertise in delivering telephonic intervention services, triaging the call to assess for additional needs and coordinating connections to additional support based on the assessment of the team and the preferences of the caller.

Minimum Expectations to Operate a Regional Crisis Call Service

1. Operate every moment of every day (24/7/365);
2. Be staffed with clinicians overseeing clinical triage and other trained team members to respond to all calls received;
3. Answer every call or coordinate overflow coverage with a resource that also meets all of the minimum crisis call center expectations defined in this toolkit;
4. Assess risk of suicide in a manner that meets NSPL standards and danger to others within each call;

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5. Coordinate connections to crisis mobile team services in the region; *and*
6. Connect individuals to facility-based care through warm hand-offs and coordination of transportation as needed.

Best Practices to Operate Regional Crisis Call Center

To fully align with best practice guidelines, centers must meet the minimum expectations and:

1. Incorporate Caller ID functioning;
2. Implement GPS-enabled technology in collaboration with partner crisis mobile teams to more efficiently dispatch care to those in need;
3. Utilize real-time regional bed registry technology to support efficient connection to needed resources; *and*
4. Schedule outpatient follow-up appointments in a manner synonymous with a warm handoff to support connection to ongoing care following a crisis episode.

To align with National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (NSPL) operational standards, centers must:

1. Practice **active engagement** with callers and make efforts to establish sufficient rapport so as to promote the caller's collaboration in securing his/her own safety;
2. Use the **least invasive intervention** and consider involuntary emergency interventions as a last resort, except for in circumstances as described below;
3. Initiate life-saving services for attempts in progress – in accordance with guidelines that do not require the individual's consent to initiate medically necessary rescue services;
4. Initiate active rescue to secure the immediate safety of the individual at risk if the caller remains unwilling and/or unable to take action to prevent his/her suicide and remains at imminent risk;
5. Practice active engagement with persons calling on behalf of someone else ("third-party callers") towards determining the least invasive, most collaborative actions to best ensure the safety of the person at risk;
6. Have supervisory staff available during all hours of operations for timely consultation in determining the most appropriate intervention for any individual who may be at imminent risk of suicide; *and*
7. Maintain caller ID or other method of identifying the caller's location that is readily accessible to staff.

True regional crisis call center hub services that offer air traffic control-type functioning are essential to the success of a crisis system. Cracks within a system of care widen when individuals experience interminable delays in access to services which are often based on an absence of:

1. Real-time coordination of crisis and outgoing services; *and*
2. Linked, flexible services specific to crisis response; namely mobile crisis teams and crisis stabilization facilities.

Mobile Crisis Team Services – *Someone To Respond*

Mobile crisis team services offering community-based intervention to individuals in need wherever they are; including at home, work, or anywhere else in the community where the person is experiencing a crisis. For safety and optimal engagement, two person teams should be put in place to support emergency department and justice system diversion. EMS services should be aware and partner as warranted.

Minimum Expectations to Operate a Mobile Crisis Team Services

1. Include a licensed and/or credentialed clinician capable to assessing the needs of individuals within the region of operation;
2. Respond where the person is (home, work, park, etc.) and not restrict services to select locations within the region or particular days/times; *and*
3. Connect to facility-based care as needed through warm hand-offs and coordinating transportation when and only if situations warrants transition to other locations.

Best Practices to Operate Mobile Crisis Team Services

To fully align with best practice guidelines, teams must meet the minimum expectations and:

1. Incorporate peers within the mobile crisis team;
2. Respond without law enforcement accompaniment unless special circumstances warrant inclusion in order to support true justice system diversion;
3. Implement real-time GPS technology in partnership with the region's crisis call center hub to support efficient connection to needed resources and tracking of engagement; *and*
4. Schedule outpatient follow-up appointments in a manner synonymous with a warm handoff in order to support connection to ongoing care.

Essential functions of mobile crisis services include:

- Triage/screening, including explicit screening for suicidality;
- Assessment;
- De-escalation/resolution;
- Peer support;
- Coordination with medical and behavioral health services; *and*
- Crisis planning and follow-up.

Crisis Receiving and Stabilization Services – *A Place to Go*

Crisis receiving and stabilization services offer the community a no-wrong-door access to mental health and substance use care; operating much like a hospital emergency department that accepts all walk-ins, ambulance, fire and police drop-offs. The need to say yes to mental health crisis referrals, including working with persons of varying ages (as allowed by facility license) and clinical conditions (such as serious emotional disturbance, serious mental illness, intellectual and developmental disabilities), regardless of acuity, informs program staffing, physical space, structure and use of chairs or recliners in lieu of beds that offer far less capacity or flexibility within a given space. It is important to fund these facility-based programs so they can deliver on

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the commitment of never rejecting a first responder or walk-in referral in order to realize actual emergency department and justice system diversion. If an individual's condition is assessed to require medical attention in a hospital or referral to a dedicated withdrawal management (i.e., referred to more commonly and historically as detoxification) program, it is the responsibility of the crisis receiving and stabilization facility to make those arrangements and not shift that responsibility to the initial referral source (family, first responder or mobile team). Law enforcement is not expected to do the triage or assessment for the crisis system and it is important that those lines never become blurred.

Minimum Expectations to Operate a Crisis Receiving and Stabilization Service

1. Accept all referrals;
2. Not require medical clearance prior to admission but rather assessment and support for medical stability while in the program;
3. Design their services to address mental health and substance use crisis issues;
4. Employ the capacity to assess physical health needs and deliver care for most minor physical health challenges with an identified pathway in order to transfer the individual to more medically staffed services if needed;
5. Be staffed at all times (24/7/365) with a multidisciplinary team capable of meeting the needs of individuals experiencing all levels of crisis in the community; including:
 - a. Psychiatrists or psychiatric nurse practitioners (telehealth may be used)
 - b. Nurses
 - c. Licensed and/or credentialed clinicians capable of completing assessments in the region; *and*
 - d. Peers with lived experience similar to the experience of the population served.
6. Offer walk-in and first responder drop-off options;
7. Be structured in a manner that offers capacity to accept all referrals, understanding that facility capacity limitations may result in occasional exceptions when full, with a no rejection policy for first responders;
8. Screen for suicide risk and complete comprehensive suicide risk assessments and planning when clinically indicated; *and*
9. Screen for violence risk and complete more comprehensive violence risk assessments and planning when clinically indicated.

Best Practices to Operate Crisis Receiving and Stabilization Services

To fully align with best practice guidelines, centers must meet the minimum expectations and:

1. Function as a 24 hour or less crisis receiving and stabilization facility;
2. Offer a dedicated first responder drop-off area;
3. Incorporate some form of intensive support beds into a partner program (could be within the services' own program or within another provider) to support flow for individuals who need additional support;
4. Include beds within the real-time regional bed registry system operated by the crisis call center hub to support efficient connection to needed resources; *and*
5. Coordinate connection to ongoing care.

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The Role of the Psychiatrist/Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner

Psychiatrists and Psychiatric Nurse Practitioners serve as clinical leaders of the multi-disciplinary crisis team. Essential functions include ensuring clinical soundness of crisis services through evaluation of need, continued monitoring of care and crisis service discharge planning.

Essential Principles for Modern Crisis Care Systems

Best practice crisis care incorporates a set of core principles that must be systematically “baked in” to excellent crisis systems in addition to the core structural elements that are defined as essential for modern crisis systems. These essential principles and practices are:

1. Addressing Recovery Needs,
2. Significant Role for Peers,
3. Trauma-Informed Care,
4. *Zero Suicide*/Suicide Safer Care,
5. Safety/Security for Staff and People in Crisis *and*
6. Crisis Response Partnerships with Law Enforcement, Dispatch, and Emergency Medical Services.

Addressing Recovery Needs

Crisis providers must address the recovery needs of individuals and families to move beyond their mental health and substance use challenges to lead happy, productive and connected lives each and every day.

Implementation Guidance

1. *Commit to a no-force-first approach to quality improvement in care that is characterized by engagement and collaboration.*
2. *Create engaging and supportive environments that are as free of barriers as possible. This should include eliminating Plexiglas from crisis stabilization units and minimal barriers between team members and those being served to support stronger connections.*
3. *Ensure team members engage individuals in the care process during a crisis. Communicate clearly regarding all options clearly and offer materials regarding the process in writing in the individual’s preferred language whenever possible.*
4. *Ask the individual served about their preferences and do what can be done to align actions to those preferences.*
5. *Help ensure natural supports and personal attendants are also part of the planning team, such as with youth and persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities.*
6. *Work to convert those with an involuntary commitment to voluntary so they are invested in their own recovery.*

Significant Role for Peers

A transformative element of recovery-oriented care is to fully engage the experience, capabilities and compassion of people who have experienced mental health crises. Including individuals with lived mental health and substance use disorder experience (peers) as core members of a crisis

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team supports engagement efforts through the unique power of bonding over common experiences while adding the benefits of the peer modeling that recovery is possible.

Implementation Guidance

1. *Hire credentialed peers with lived experience that reflect the characteristics of the community served as much as possible. Peers should be hired with attention to common characteristics such as gender, race, primary language, ethnicity, religion, veteran status, lived experiences and age.*
2. *Develop support and supervision that aligns with the needs of your program's team members.*
3. *Emphasize engagement as a fundamental pillar of care that includes peers as a vital part of a crisis program's service delivery system. This should include (1) integrating peers within available crisis line operations, (2) having peers serve as one of two mobile team members and (3) ensuring a peer is one of the first individuals to greet an individual admitted to a crisis stabilization facility.*

Trauma-Informed Care

The great majority of individuals served in mental health and substance use services have experienced significant interpersonal trauma. Mental health crises and suicidality often are rooted in trauma. These crises are compounded when crisis care involves loss of freedom, noisy and crowded environments and/or the use of force. These situations can actually re-traumatize individuals at the worst possible time, leading to worsened symptoms and a genuine reluctance to seek help in the future.

On the other hand, environments and treatment approaches that are safe and calm can facilitate healing. Thus, we find that trauma-informed care is an essential element of crisis treatment. In 2014, SAMHSA set the following guiding principles for trauma-informed care:

1. Safety;
2. Trustworthiness and transparency;
3. Peer support and mutual self-help;
4. Collaboration and mutuality;
5. Empowerment, voice and choice; *and*
6. Ensuring cultural, historical and gender considerations inform the care provided.

Trauma-informed systems of care ensure these practices are integrated into service delivery. Developing and maintaining a healthy environment of care also requires support for staff, who may have experienced trauma themselves.

Implementation Guidance

1. *Incorporate trauma-informed care training into each team member's new employee orientation with refreshers delivered as needed.*
2. *Apply assessment tools that evaluate the level of trauma experienced by the individuals served by the crisis program and create action steps based on those assessments.*

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Zero Suicide/Suicide Safer Care

Two transformational commitments must be made by every crisis provider in the nation: (1) adoption of suicide prevention as a core responsibility, and (2) commitment to dramatic reductions in suicide among people under care. These changes were adopted and advanced in the revised *National Strategy for Suicide Prevention* (2012), specifically via a new Goal 8: “Promote suicide prevention as a core component of health care services” (p. 51).

The following key elements of Zero Suicide or Suicide Safer Care are all applicable to crisis care:

1. Leadership-driven, safety-oriented culture committed to dramatically reducing suicide among people under care, that includes survivors of suicide attempts and suicide loss in leadership and planning roles;
2. Developing a competent, confident, and caring workforce;
3. Systematically identifying and assessing suicide risk among people receiving care;
4. Ensuring every individual has a pathway to care that is both timely and adequate to meet his or her needs and includes collaborative safety planning and a reduction in access to lethal means;
5. Using effective, evidence-based treatments that directly target suicidal thoughts and behaviors;
6. Providing continuous contact and support; especially after acute care; *and*
7. Applying a data-driven quality improvement approach to inform system changes that will lead to improved patient outcomes and better care for those at risk.

Safety/Security for Staff and People in Crisis

Safety for both individuals served and staff is a foundational element for all crisis service settings. Crisis settings are also on the front lines of assessing and managing suicidality and possibly violent thoughts or aggressive behaviors, issues with life and death consequences. While ensuring safety for people using crisis services is paramount, the safety for staff cannot be compromised. Keys to safety and security in crisis delivery settings include:

- Evidence-based and trauma-informed crisis training for all staff;
- Role-specific staff training and appropriate staffing ratios to number of clients being served;
- A non-institutional and welcoming physical space and environment for persons in crisis, rather than Plexiglas “fishbowl” observation rooms and keypad-locked doors. This space must also be anti-ligature sensitive and contain safe rooms for people for whom violence may be imminent;
- Established policies and procedures emphasizing “no force first” prior to implementation of safe physical restraint or seclusion procedures;
- Pre-established criteria for crisis system entry;
- Strong relationships with law enforcement and first responders; *and*
- Policies that include the roles of clinical staff (and law enforcement if needed) for management of incidents of behavior that places others at risk.

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Providers must establish environments that are safe for those they serve as well as their own team members who are charged with delivering high quality crisis care that aligns with best practice guidelines. The keys to safety and security for home visits by mental health staff include:

- No mental health crisis outreach worker will be required to conduct home visits alone.
- Employers will equip mental health workers who engage in home visits with a communication device.
- Mental health workers dispatched on crisis outreach visits will have prompt access to any information available on history of dangerousness or potential dangerousness of the client they are visiting.

Implementation Guidance

1. *Commit to a no-force-first approach to care.*
2. *Monitor, report and review all incidents of seclusion and restraint with the goal of minimizing the use of these interventions.*
3. *Remember that barriers do not equal safety. The key to safety is engagement and empowerment of the individual served while in crisis.*
4. *Offer enough space in the physical environment to meet the needs of the population served. A lack of space can elevate anxiety for all.*
5. *Incorporate quiet spaces into your crisis facility for those who would benefit from time away from the milieu of the main stabilization area.*
6. *Engage your team members and those you serve in discussions regarding how to enhance safety within the crisis program.*

Law Enforcement and Crisis Response—An Essential Partnership

Law enforcement agencies have reported a significant increase in police contacts with people with mental illness in recent years. Some involvement with mental health crises is inevitable for police. Police officers may (1) provide support in potentially dangerous situations when the need is assessed or (2) make warm hand-offs into crisis care if they happen to be first to engage.

In many communities across the United States, the absence of sufficient and well-integrated mental health crisis care has made local law enforcement the *de facto* mental health mobile crisis system. This is unacceptable and unsafe. The role of local law enforcement in addressing emergent public safety risk is essential and important. With good mental health crisis care in place, the care team can collaborate with law enforcement in a fashion that will improve both public safety and mental health outcomes. Unfortunately, well-intentioned law enforcement responders to a crisis call can escalate the situation solely based on the presence of police vehicles and armed officers that generate anxiety for far too many individuals in a crisis.

Implementation Guidance

1. *Have local crisis providers actively participate in Crisis Intervention Team training or related mental health crisis management training sessions.*

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2. *Incorporate regular meetings between law enforcement and crisis providers, including EMS and dispatch, into the schedule so these partners can work to continuously improve their practices.*
3. *Include training on crisis provider and law enforcement partnerships in the training for both partner groups.*
4. *Share aggregate outcomes data such as numbers served, percentage stabilized and returned to the community and connections to ongoing care.*

Psychiatric Advance Directives

A psychiatric or mental health advance directive (PAD) is a legal tool that allows a person with mental illness to state their preferences for treatment in advance of a crisis. They can serve as a way to protect a person's autonomy and ability to self-direct care. Crisis providers are expected to always seek to understand and implement any existing PAD that has been developed by the individual during the evaluation phase and work to ensure the individual discharges from crisis care with an updated and accurate psychiatric advance directive whenever possible. PAD creates a path to express treatment preferences and identify a representative who is trusted and legally empowered to make healthcare decisions on medications, preferred facilities, and listings of visitors.

Funding Crisis Care

The full *Crisis Services Best Practice Toolkit* document contains specific strategies on how a community can fund each of the core crisis system elements in single and multiple-payer environments. Additionally, recommendations on service coding already being reimbursed by Medicaid in multiple states are made available; including the use of *HCPCS code H2011 Crisis Intervention Service per 15 Minutes* for mobile crisis services and *S9484 Crisis Intervention Mental Health Services per Hour* or *S9485 Crisis Intervention Mental Health Services per Diem* for crisis receiving and stabilization facility services.

Training and Supervision

Many members of the crisis services delivery team are licensed mental health and substance use professionals operating within the scope of their license and training with supervision delivered in a manner consistent with professional expectations of the licensing board. Licensed professionals are expected to strengthen their skills and knowledge through ongoing CEU and CME professional advancement opportunities focused on improving team members' ability to deliver crisis care.

Providers also incorporate non-licensed individuals within the service delivery team; creating the need for additional training and supervision to ensure services are delivered in a manner that advances positive outcomes for those engaged in care. Verification of skills and knowledge of

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non-professional staff is essential to maintaining service delivery standards within a crisis program; including the incorporation of ongoing supervision with licensed professionals available on site at all times. Supervision and the verification of skills and knowledge shall include, but is not limited to, active engagement strategies, trauma-informed care, addressing recovery needs, suicide-safer care, community resources, psychiatric advance directives and role-specific tasks.

Conclusion

Crisis services must be designed to serve **anyone, anywhere and anytime**. Communities that commit to this approach and dedicate resources to address the community need decrease psychiatric boarding in emergency departments and reduce the demands on the justice system. These two benefits translate into better care, better health outcomes and lower costs to the community. The *National Guidelines for Crisis Care – A Best Practice Toolkit* delivers a roadmap that can be used to truly make a positive impact to communities across the country.