

Speaking Safely About Bridge Barriers in Suicide Prevention:

Guidance for News Media

Updated November 2024

Individuals who wish to reach out to the media about their advocacy efforts related to suicide deterrent bridge barriers, or are approached by the media in this regard, are encouraged to reach out to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) Public Relations team to work together on how to respond to those requests following the guidance below.

Research shows that including certain details or describing a method of suicide in news stories can lead to more suicide deaths (via contagion or copycat behavior), making it critical that careful attention is given to how we, and by extension, media, share our stories.

It's extremely important to encourage media to use AFSP's [guidelines for reporting on suicide](#) and offer personal stories of hope, recovery, and helpful resources to avoid suicide contagion.

Follow this guidance when engaging the media on your advocacy efforts related to bridges and suicide.

Keep in Mind

- **Contact PR Team if Media Contact You:** If the media approaches you to participate in a story, reach out to AFSP's PR team. We are ready and willing to equip you with the tools you need to ensure media is safely reporting on your advocacy efforts. We can be reached at pr@afsp.org.
- **Provide Suicide Reporting Guidance:** If you are aware of media in your area working on a related story, please reach out to AFSP's PR team so that we can offer guidance on reporting on suicide and policy expertise. For AFSP's general guidance on reporting on suicide please see afsp.org/safereporting/.
- **Steer the Message:** Work with AFSP's PR team to steer the message and share resources. For example, we can help you submit an op-ed focused on the urgency with hopeful stories or consider other tactics such as a media roundtable to reach all media at once with your messages.

Guidance for Media

In addition to the [Guidelines on Reporting on Suicide](#), AFSP encourages sharing the following recommendations with media who intend to write stories related to structures and suicide. Our goal is to provide guidance and seek the best way to showcase your advocacy efforts.

1. Framing matters

- a. **Hope**—Research shows that stories of hope and recovery can encourage help-seeking.
- b. **Lives Saved**—Focus the story on how lives are being saved, not how many lives have been lost at a bridge. Another way to think about it is to focus on the benefits of installing barriers instead of the problems with the bridge. And after the barrier is installed, it's an opportunity to share positive stories.
- c. **Imagery**—It can be harmful to share imagery of the bridge and barrier in a way that makes the specific location of the barrier identifiable or paints a picture of what the fall would look like. For people at risk for suicide, this imagery can be alluring, so we recommend avoiding inclusions of either.

d. **Personal Stories**—When reporting about a suicide or attempt, we strongly recommend avoiding connecting personal stories to a specific method. In this case, the method is the structure that requires barriers. Connecting a person to the method of suicide death can negatively affect vulnerable people who may identify with the individual who attempted or died and lead them to attempt by the same method. This is especially true when there isn't a story of hope or resilience included. In certain instances where this is unavoidable, such as covering suicide loss tied to a specific bridge, avoid sharing vivid details or depictions of the attempt. See below for further guidance on this.

2. Writing headlines

- a. Avoid using the word “suicide” in a headline when possible. It’s especially inadvisable to include the words “bridge” and “suicide” together in a headline as it indicates the method of an attempt or death and can inadvertently cause contagion.
- b. When naming a bridge in the headline, frame the title to be about saving lives (example: “Saving Lives at the Golden Gate Bridge”).

3. Be intentional

- a. Do not include details about the location of the bridge, depictions of someone attempting suicide, quotes from anyone in distress, or mention or provide details of a suicide note.
- b. Focus on the hopeful message and the fact that suicide can be preventable. According to research, sharing stories of hope and recovery, along with suicide prevention resources can reduce suicide contagion. For example, tell stories of individuals who were saved by barriers and their healing journey.
- c. Emphasizing the way someone lived instead of the way someone died can encourage those who are vulnerable to seek help. Media coverage in this manner can be a protective factor to prevent suicide.

Examples of ethical coverage related to bridged and structures

- The New York Times, Ellen Barry: [Hope for Suicide Prevention](#) (Feb. 21, 2024)
- Los Angeles Times, Emily Alpert Reyes & Corinne Purtill: [As Disneyland reels from its third death in a year, what can be done to prevent suicides?](#) (Nov. 3, 2023)
- Columbia Daily Tribune, Charles Dunlap: [Installation of suicide prevention window barriers starts at Fifth and Walnut garage](#) (Mar. 4, 2023)
- Dcist, Martin Austermuhle: [D.C. Moves Forward With New Anti-Suicide Barriers on Taft Bridge](#) (Jan. 18th, 2023)