



TEXAS  
Health and Human  
Services

# Connection to Hope: A Suicide Prevention Newsletter

OMHC - Office of Mental Health Coordination



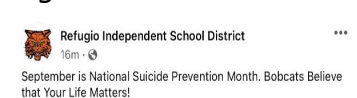
## *In this issue...*

<b>Suicide Prevention Awareness Month Success .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Self-Care .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Data Corner.....</b>	<b>5</b>

## Suicide Prevention Awareness Month Success

### **School Suicide Prevention Scores a Touchdown in Rural Community**

During National Suicide Prevention Awareness Month this past September, Refugio Independent School District (ISD) students took part in a campaign to raise awareness about suicide through their love of football. The Refugio High School Bobcats have an outstanding record of successful football seasons and numerous state championship titles. The entire community comes together for "Friday Night Lights" to cheer on their beloved football team. It is a school tradition for the



cheerleaders to throw plastic footballs into the crowd every time the Bobcats score a touchdown. This season, the cheerleaders threw footballs that read, "Call or Text 988" and "Bobcats Believe That Your Life Matters."

The Refugio ISD School Board paid for a one-page ad in the football program, stating they "[support] the mental wellness of students and families in our community."

Refugio ISD staff and students wanted their community to know they care about everyone's mental wellbeing and safety and will continue to talk about suicide prevention to break down the stigma and raise awareness.

Refugio ISD was part of the five-year Texas Project Advancing Wellness and Resiliency in Education (AWARE) grant awarded to the Texas Education Agency (TEA) by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) has been a partner with TEA since the grant's inception in 2019 and continues to partner with TEA for their second AWARE grant which began in 2021. HHSC is also a partner with three community AWARE grantees: Laredo's Serving Children and Adults in Need since 2022, Communities in Schools of San Antonio, and Harris County Resources for Children and Adults, both which began this year.



## Self-Care

### **Navigating the Holidays with The Virtual Hope Box: Suicide Prevention and Restoring Hope**

Preventing suicide and providing hope during the holidays are critical and sensitive topics. The holiday season can be a challenging time for many people, as it can intensify feelings of loneliness, depression, and isolation. A Virtual Hope Box can be an excellent resource for managing these difficult emotions. It is a digital version of the traditional Hope Box and is accessible on smartphones or computers.

People can use the Virtual Hope Box to store a variety of rich multimedia content they find helpful in times of need. For example, a person can include family photos, videos, and recorded messages from loved ones, inspirational quotes, music they find especially soothing, reminders of previous personal successes, positive life experiences and future aspirations, and affirmations of their worth. Additionally, the Virtual Hope Box provides a person with positive activity planning, distraction tools, and interactive relaxation exercises including guided imagery, controlled breathing, and muscle relaxation.

A Virtual Hope Box can be a portable and convenient way for someone to carry a source of comfort and hope with them. It can serve as a digital lifeline to help people manage grief and challenging emotions, and it can connect people with the resources and support they need.



Though the mobile app was designed with Service Members, Veterans, and their Families in mind, the app may be downloaded and used by

anyone. You can visit the following link to download the app on iOS and Android:  
<https://www.militaryonesource.mil/resources/mobile-apps/virtual-hope-box/>

## **Sound-Off App Revolutionizes Mental Health Care for Military Service Members and Veterans**

While the reasons that people consider, attempt, or die by suicide are complex and multi-factorial, we know that access to mental health services is crucial in the prevention of suicide deaths. This is especially important in the military community where stigma is one of the most reported barriers to care by service members and veterans (SM/V). In fact, approximately 60 percent of military personnel who experience mental health problems do not seek resources or counseling.<sup>1</sup>

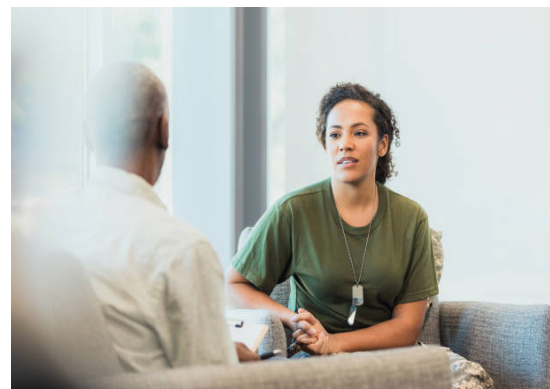
A recently developed app, Sound-Off, is looking to change that with anonymous mental health services for SM/Vs. Sound-Off not only addresses the personal and professional stigma that often prevents SM/Vs from accessing services, but it also addresses the lack of trust in doctors, bureaucracy, and geographical limitations that can create barriers to SM/Vs accessing care.

According to their website, Sound-Off is the “first and only mental health resource for Veteran, Service Members, and Intelligence Officers that allows both anonymity and repeat contact with clinicians or peers.”<sup>2</sup> There are a couple of key factors that allow this process to happen:

1. All interactions between the “client” and the mental health professional are maintained in the app using Voice Over Internet Protocol. No phone numbers or other identifying information are exchanged, and video is not an option.
2. The SM/V is assigned a pseudonym (e.g., RedFox123).

This process allows a client to engage with the same provider, helping to build therapeutic trust and rapport, while remaining anonymous and eliminating fears associated with others knowing they are receiving services. Because there is no request for a verification of military status, such as a DD214 form, it is possible that people with no military history could access services, but the app’s leadership says this is unlikely to happen and a minimal concern.

It is important to note that Sound-Off is not intended for those needing a crisis level of care but is meant for those looking to connect to either a licensed clinician or a trained peer. This is stated clearly in the application



---

<sup>1</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25595168/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://sound-off.com/>

and users understand through informed consent what the limitations of anonymity are, and that providers will request information if it is indicated. If you or someone you know could benefit from free, anonymous mental health services and are a military SM/V or intelligence officer, please visit [www.sound-off.com](http://www.sound-off.com) for more information.

## **Coping with Grief During the Holidays**

The holidays are commonly thought of as a happy and joyous time of the year, but this is not the case for everyone. People may have experienced struggles, loss, and grief throughout the year. Coping with grief during the holidays can be especially tough as the contrast between the festive atmosphere and the feelings of sadness and loss can be overwhelming. Grief is a natural response to loss, and it is possible to find a way through this challenging time, allowing for a mix of healing and even moments of happiness.

It is important to identify, anticipate, and prepare for ways in which our holiday observances may elicit grief reminders. If you will be celebrating with others who have also been impacted by loss, make a plan together.

Here are six ways to help cope with grief during the holidays:

- Discuss ways in which the holidays have been celebrated in the past.
- Think about what the holidays mean to you and consider if you want to celebrate them differently or how the holidays will be celebrated now.
- Recognize that people will be in a different place in their grief process and may need different supports.
- Set realistic expectations and give yourself permission to laugh and permission to grieve.
- Make self-care a priority by maintaining a healthy routine and engaging in activities that bring you comfort and peace.
- Acknowledge that there will be a “new normal.”

Lastly, lean on your support systems and reach out to friends and family who understand your grief and are willing to listen and provide support. Having an intentional plan in advance helps diffuse a potentially emotionally charged day. If you or someone you know needs extra help or support this holiday season, call or text the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.



## Data Corner

### **Provisional Texas Suicide Death Counts by Select Industries, 2021-2022<sup>3</sup>**

Through an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved project, HHSC has acquired near real time<sup>4</sup> suicide mortality data. The IRB agreement restricts how much data may be shared publicly and in what form. Please keep in mind when interpreting this data that it is provisional and subject to change.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has an online program called NIOSH Industry and Occupation Computerized Coding System (NIOCCS) that codes text fields from death certificates into standardized industry and occupation categories. Utilizing NIOCCS, HHSC has identified the industries in Texas with the highest numbers of suicide deaths.

The table below shows these industry categories and the count of suicide deaths in that industry from 2021 and 2022. The total number of suicide deaths in this provisional data for the years 2021 and 2022 is 8,664.

This list contains industries that are known to have higher suicide mortality rates in the U.S. population. For example, it is well established that workers in construction and related contracting industries (e.g., electrical and plumbing) have higher rates of suicide death. It is also known that individuals in the U.S. armed forces, police, oil and gas extraction, and medical services have higher rates of suicide than the general public.

Other industry data showing high suicide rates include truck transportation, manufacturing, retail and food service workers, automotive repair and maintenance, and computer systems design. The single largest group is non-paid workers, which largely consists of students, homemakers, and retirees with students accounting for half that number. This may be an alarming number, but one should consider the number of students in the state is currently over seven million.

Since counts are solely being considered at this point and not rates, it is not possible to say that people in any of these industries definitively have higher suicide mortality rates than the general public or are more likely to die by suicide. HHSC is

---

<sup>3</sup> Vital Events Data, Center for Health Statistics, Texas Department of State Health Services, IRB# 22-027

<sup>4</sup> Near real time means that this DSHS provisional data is available quarterly with only a 90-day lag unlike finalized mortality data which has a two-year lag. 2022 was the most recent complete year available to HHSC.

currently working on getting tallies for the number of people who work in each of these industries in the state of Texas. For now, it is valuable to consider the number of lives lost in each group over two years to help identify where resources could be best be used for interventions.

<b>Provisional Texas Suicide Death Counts by Select Industries, 2021-2022</b>	
<b>U.S. Armed Forces - Combined</b>	<b>195</b>
Architectural, Engineering, and Related Services	110
Automotive Repair and Maintenance	158
Computer Systems Design and Related Services	140
Construction	506
Electrical Contractors and Other Wiring Installation Contractors	113
Elementary and Secondary Schools	146
Food Services and Drinking Places	315
General Medical and Surgical Hospitals	173
Independent Artists, Writers, and Performers	88
Landscaping Services	88
Manufacturing	100
Non-Paid workers	1,083



<b>Provisional Texas Suicide Death Counts by Select Industries, 2021-2022</b>	
<b>U.S. Armed Forces - Combined</b>	<b>195</b>
Oil and Gas Extraction	168
Plumbing, Heating, and Air-Conditioning Contractors	90
Police Protection	85
Retail Trade	260
Truck Transportation	229

## Share Your Success Story

The State Suicide Prevention Team would like to recognize you! If you have a suicide prevention program, success story, or event you would like to share with others, please email [suicide.prevention@hhs.texas.gov](mailto:suicide.prevention@hhs.texas.gov) to have it featured in the next edition of the newsletter.