

# Suicide Prevention: Why It Should Matter to All of Us

*Cal Beyer, Vice President, Workforce Risk and Worker Wellbeing*



For as long as I can remember, [mental health and suicide prevention](#) have been connected to my work. Since I'm somewhat new with CSDZ, I wanted to quickly give my background, what drove me into this field, and why I believe workforce risk and worker wellbeing is absolutely critical to the construction industry. Hopefully, this gives you some insight into me and my role, and what we can do for you!

## **My Workforce Risk and Wellbeing Background**

I worked in healthcare through high school and college — yes, even in high school! I was frequently exposed to the challenges of mental health and occasionally to suicide. From those experiences, I became determined to learn how to help people and to make a difference in the lives of others.

Before I became a construction specialist, I was dedicated to public entity risk management for 10 years. My first behavioral health project in the workplace dates to a municipality I worked for

in the late 1980s when I learned about employee assistance programs for first responders. I grew to understand why first responders were skeptical of this employee benefit program. And, this is one reason I have so much respect for the innovative [Responder Health program!](#)

My first [suicide prevention](#) project was a few years later, when I learned to evaluate strategies to reduce suicides in lockup facilities. Initially, resistance ran high to the concepts. In the end, I helped to increase knowledge of the need for physical and mental health assessments when processing new detainees.

When I moved to the construction industry in 1996, I was confronted by the need to expand my learning in critical incident response. This frequently included finding grief counselors following fatality incidents and injuries at the jobsite. Initially, there was resistance that this service was not needed and that [“we’re tough”](#) and [“we’ve been through this before.”](#) These types of interventions helped companies in the aftermath of the 9-11 terrorist attacks and the destruction of Hurricane Katrina. Over time, the new norm became incorporating psychological first aid after such critical incidents.

In 2009, I co-authored an article for the [Construction Financial Management Association \(CFMA\)](#) on the topic of [“The Critical Human Element of Crisis Risk Management.”](#) The lead author was Bob VandePol, then President of the Crisis Care Network and now the Director of Employee Assistance Program for Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services in Grand Rapids, MI. I’ve had the privilege of co-authoring additional articles and co-presenting with Bob since that time. Bob changed the trajectory of my life — and career — when he proclaimed in 2008, “Someday, you’ll be the pied-piper in your industry for suicide prevention, but not until you believe it.”

In 2010, the [National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention](#) was created. It is a public-private partnership focused on reducing the burden of suicide loss in America. Bob VandePol was appointed as co-chair of the Workplace Task Force with Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas. I was the first and only non-clinical member of this Task Force. I co-chaired the Workplace Task Force from 2015-2017 and was appointed to the Executive Committee in 2016 on which [I continue to serve.](#)

In 2014, I left the insurance industry and went to work for a contractor in the Pacific Northwest who was willing to allow me to incorporate mental health and suicide prevention into safety, health, and wellness culture and practices.

In 2015, I lost a dear friend to suicide. In honor of him, I “declared war on suicide.” I decided I needed to be a bolder and more vocal leader to help others like him from slipping through the cracks.

The [Construction Industry Alliance for Suicide Prevention \(CIASP\)](#) was formed in October 2016 to support my efforts. The Construction Subcommittee of the Action Alliance was honored by the International Risk Management Association (IRMI) Gary Bird Horizon Award for Innovation in 2016. In April 2017, I was recognized by *Engineering News-Record*, as a Top 25

Newsmaker for 2016 for my work with suicide prevention. Through all of this, we've worked to (and have) significantly reduced stigma in our industry.

## **Suicide Prevention Awareness Month Is Upon Us**

So, it's almost September, which means another [Suicide Prevention Awareness Month](#) is upon us. There were more than [48,000 suicide deaths in 2018](#), the last year for which data exists. This number has increased by almost 35 percent since 1999. In 2017, almost 38,000 suicide deaths were working-aged adults. This is why suicide prevention is imperative to workplace leadership.

I asked my colleagues at the Secretariat for the National Action Alliance a few questions recently, and I wanted to share their responses.

### **Why Is Addressing Suicide Prevention So Important in the Workplace?**

Since most people who die by suicide are of working age, **workplaces play a key role in keeping people safe** as well as responding appropriately when suicide-related crises or tragedies occur.

Promoting mental health and wellness in the workplace will not only support suicide prevention, but also increase productivity and wellbeing among workers. All companies can take action. As employers consider policies and programming to support employees, especially during COVID-19, we encourage them to consider addressing mental health and building in additional support for employees and their families. Employers who are downsizing and/or furloughing staff can be intentional in helping employees navigate that change.

### **Why Is It Important to Bring Together Public and Private Sectors to Address Suicide and Suicide Prevention at the National Level?**

Suicide is not solely a mental health issue—it's a public health issue that requires all sectors of society to effectively address. The Action Alliance brings the influence, reach, and expertise from the public sector and private sector, representing diverse sectors to coordinate a national suicide prevention response.

### **What Message Does the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention Have for Workplaces Sharing the Lethal Means Reduction Project?**

Every suicide involves a lethal means (e.g., firearms, medicines, illicit drugs). By putting time and distance between a lethal means and individuals who may be struggling or in crisis, suicide can be prevented. The Action Alliance, and its [Lethal Means Stakeholder Group](#), recognize that employers can play an important role in this work to save lives by partnering with communities to promote safe storage of firearms and safe storage and disposal of medicines among their employees and their families.

## **Work with Us to Raise Awareness**

I'm so proud to work for CSDZ and Holmes Murphy. This family of companies was an early adopter pre-COVID-19 with a strong commitment in the [wellbeing space](#) before the mental health pandemic started.

Working together to [share resources](#) on mental health awareness and suicide prevention, we can make an impact on the quality of lives of our clients, prospects, business partners, and our families. I hope you'll join me in this journey.

In the meantime (or at any time, for that matter), don't hesitate to [reach out to us](#). We'd love to talk with you about this topic and continue moving the construction industry in the direction of physical AND emotional/mental wellbeing.