



# Policy Brief: Celebrating Life Suicide Prevention Program

## About Celebrating Life

The Celebrating Life Suicide Prevention Program was established by the White Mountain Apache Tribe in Arizona in 2002 after they noticed increased deaths by suicide.

## About the Celebrating Life Suicide Prevention Program Surveillance System and Case Management

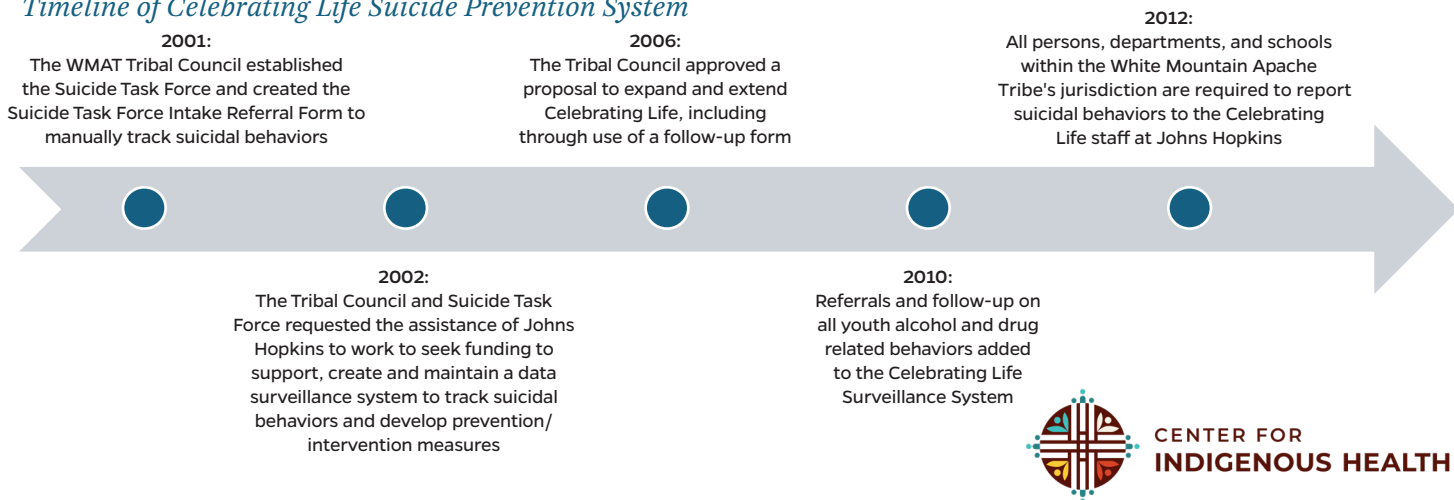
The White Mountain Apache Tribe’s Celebrating Life Suicide Prevention Program is supported by a tribal mandate enacted in 2002 through the power of tribal sovereignty mandating reporting of suicidal behaviors and binge alcohol/substance use. It mandates that all first responders and health care providers refer suicidal behaviors to the suicide task force. In 2006, the Tribal Council extended the mandate to include all individuals residing and working on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation, which included all departments and schools.

The surveillance system functions as follows: An initial referral is submitted describing a reportable behavior (suicide ideation, non-suicidal self-injury, binge substance use, suicide attempt, or suicide death). Celebrating Life Suicide Prevention staff, including community mental health specialists, seek out the at-risk individual to complete an in-person follow-up visit to corroborate the initial report, gather additional information, and identify additional support services for the individual.

## Collaboration with the Johns Hopkins Center for Indigenous Health

The team working on the Celebrating Life Suicide Prevention Program are employed by the Center for Indigenous Health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and many are also members of the White Mountain Apache Tribe. The tribe owns the Celebrating Life Suicide Prevention Program and the data, including access and dissemination. This collaboration and the full support of the White Mountain Apache Tribal Council and Health Board has allowed the Celebrating Life Suicide Prevention Program staff to effectively track suicide-related behaviors in real-time within the community and inform appropriate interventions around suicide prevention.

### *Timeline of Celebrating Life Suicide Prevention System*



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## Importance of Community Partners in Data Collection

The accuracy and effectiveness of the Celebrating Life Suicide Prevention surveillance system and any associated interventions are entirely dependent on strong relationships with and reporting from partner organizations (including hospitals and schools), community members, and others. Partnership and commitment from Tribal Council can support those relationships with referring agencies. Within the White Mountain Apache Tribe, mandated reporting enabled the Celebrating Life Suicide Prevention Program to effectively track community-level data and trends and support individuals through case management and other interventions. The Tribal mandate has been critical to garner buy-in from referring organizations and ensure that reporting to Celebrating Life is a priority for those organizations.

## Why and How to Implement a Tribal Mandate

A mandate can also help with community stigma around talking about suicide and confidentiality concerns about making referrals. Other communities implementing the Celebrating Life Suicide Prevention Program have taken different approaches without drafting a mandate, to varying levels of success. The Celebrating Life Suicide Prevention team strongly recommends drafting a Tribal mandate or resolution early in the implementation process. This gives the project direction and structure to initiate and sustain conversations with Tribal leadership and partner organizations. The mandate will help establish protocols up front and help referring organizations understand what is expected of them and why it is important for them to participate.

Questions to consider when drafting the mandate include:

- Included behaviors (binge substance use, suicide ideation, etc.)
- Explanation of how resolution interacts with current policies and laws (especially around privacy and confidentiality)
- How often reports will be presented and to whom (annual, biannual, etc.)
- How additional report requests can be made and factors for approval or denial
- Which department/agency/organization/team will oversee the surveillance database
- Who is responsible for data management and how often
- Who is allowed access for data entry
- How often data quality assurance and backups are occurring

The mandate can continue to be updated as the program becomes more established, through amendments and resolutions. For example, nearly 10 years after the White Mountain Apache Suicide Task Force was implemented, schools requested that binge substance use be added to the reportable behaviors to help them address student substance use they were observing. They provided letters of support requesting the assistance with binge substance use. Based on the request, the Celebrating Life staff presented this request to the Tribal Council for their approval of this addition to the referral forms. Other changes have included the frequency of reports to Tribal Council (once quarterly, now annually) and providing additional education and outreach to all agencies who refer to Celebrating Life.



## Establishing a Celebrating Life Suicide Prevention Program in Your Community

For new programs, similar buy-in and support is important for the success of the Celebrating Life model. However, there may be different levels of readiness and support for centralized data tracking and suicide prevention generally. When preparing to implement and adapt the Celebrating Life Suicide Prevention Program, an essential first step is to understand and assess the level of support and work to build buy-in with Tribal Leaders and other key stakeholders in the community. As reflected by the successful program within the White Mountain Apache Tribe, mandated reporting is an ideal outcome of this buy-in and support.

When implementing the Celebrating Life Suicide Prevention Program in new communities, it's recommended to:

1. Conduct community outreach to talk about suicide and build support for suicide prevention as a priority in the community. This can be challenging when many Native cultures teach us not to discuss suicide. In the White Mountain Apache community, families affected by suicide were the strongest advocates of suicide prevention work, presenting to Tribal Council and initiating the request for prevention programming. This is also when you can speak with partner agencies like schools, hospitals, and first responders to explain the need for this work and encourage their support.
2. Initiate focused conversations with Tribal leadership.
3. Draft and pass a resolution with Tribal leadership.
4. Return to communities and agencies to explain the mandate, expectations for partnership, steps to refer, and to answer any questions.

### More Information

If it is helpful to your team, you can find the [WMAT Resolution No. 05-2012-64](#) that expanded tribally mandated reporting, and other resolutions related to Celebrating Life, on the tribe's website.

### References

[Decreases in Suicide Deaths and Attempts Linked to the White Mountain Apache Suicide Surveillance and Prevention System, 2001–2012 - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)

[Community-Based Surveillance and Case Management for Suicide Prevention: An American Indian Tribally Initiated System - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)



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