

# Connecticut Suicide Prevention Conference

Inspiring Hope: Coming Together for Suicide Prevention  
May 7, 2026

## Keynote Presentation

### **Who Am I Now? Identity, Community, and the Full Arc of Suicide Prevention**

Steven J. Karaiskos, PhD, Founder of Elpis Consulting, Coaching, & Community Building

Across suicide prevention, intervention, crisis response, and postvention, one question often sits quietly beneath the surface: Who am I now? This keynote explores how identity is disrupted and reshaped across the suicide continuum for individuals experiencing suicidal ideation, for those supporting them, and for those navigating life after loss.

Drawing from lived experience, research, and decades of work in education, suicide prevention, and postvention, Steven Karaiskos, PhD, invites participants to reimagine suicide prevention as deeply relational work that spans the full arc of human experience. Through personal stories from early childhood classrooms, international school communities, and his current work at The Kita Center, Steven examines how belonging, mattering, dignity, and trust shape our capacity to stay connected when things are hardest.

This keynote also reframes hope, not as a platitude or passive feeling, but as something we actively practice together through presence, care, and relationship. By centering community as a powerful intervention, participants are invited to consider how listening, cultural humility, and care-centered practices support identity repair, reduce isolation, and create conditions where healing and growth remain possible. Grounded in the belief that we heal through relationships, this session offers a hopeful, human-centered lens on suicide prevention as one that honors complexity, recognizes postvention as prevention, and reminds us that meaningful change happens when people are seen, held, and supported across the full arc of struggle and recovery.

## Ballroom Presentation

### **Public Health Approaches to Suicide Prevention: Perspectives from Connecticut Local Health Departments**

Alysia Robinson, Suicide Prevention System Manager, United Way of Connecticut

Sara Moriarty, Principal Investigator, Connecticut Department of Public Health

Anastasiya Domnich-Kovalevsky, Deputy Director of Health, Torrington Area Health District

Joanna Keyes, Public Health Specialist, Torrington Area Health District

Darian Graells, Supervisor of Prevention Programs at McCall Behavioral Health Network

Nathan Lannan, Prevention Facilitator at McCall Behavioral Health Network

Kelley Tomlinson, MPH, CHES, Health Educator, Norwalk Health Department

Brianna Herrera, Community Health Program Assistant, Norwalk Health Department

Two local health departments will present their perspectives on the importance of the involvement of local health departments in suicide prevention. The Torrington Area Health District will share their solution-based approach to implementing comprehensive suicide prevention programming in the Northwest corner of the state. The Norwalk Health Department will share their experience in taking a public health approach to suicide prevention, including impacts made, outcomes seen, and lessons learned.

***\*\*The same workshops will be offered for the morning and afternoon workshop sessions.\*\****

**Workshop 1: Everyone Has a Seat at the Table: Elevating Lived Experience as Expertise in Suicide Prevention**

Valerie Lepoutre, Director of Peer Initiatives, National Alliance on Mental Illness, Recovery University, Advocacy Unlimited,

Stephen R. MacHattie, LCSW, RPT, Owner, Clinician, Charter Oak Family Center LLC

Grace Grinnell, Program Associate for Suicide Education and Support at NAMI Connecticut Alyeska

Tilly, MSW, Suicide Prevention System Manager, United Way of Connecticut, Project Manager, Connecticut Partnerships for Hope and Healing grant

Across Connecticut and nationwide, organizations are increasingly recognizing that suicide prevention work is strongest when people with lived experience are not only invited to share their stories—but are treated as experts whose insights shape systems, policies, and community responses. This workshop invites attendees to rethink what it means to collaborate meaningfully with those who have lived experience of suicide, crisis, trauma, and recovery. Led by members of the Connecticut Suicide Advisory Board’s Lived Experience Committee, this session will introduce upstream, peer-driven programs and models that can be integrated into community, clinical, and statewide suicide prevention efforts. Presenters will highlight effective approaches to suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention that center peer leadership and honor lived experience as a critical form of expertise.

**Workshop 2: Mental Health in the Carceral Classroom: Suicide Prevention Outside a Cell**

Taylor C. Ford, LMSW, Director of Mental Health Education, Second Chance Educational Alliance, Inc.

This workshop explores practical suicide prevention strategies tailored to incarcerated populations while offering insights applicable to professionals across healthcare, behavioral health, corrections, and community-based services. Using a trauma-informed “check-in, check-on, check-out” framework, participants will learn how intentional engagement, observation, and follow-through can strengthen suicide prevention efforts in correctional environments and during community reentry.

**Workshop 3: The Role of Lethal Means Awareness in Suicide Prevention**

Cathy Sisco, MPA, CPS, Senior Director, Wheeler’s Connecticut Center for Prevention, Wellness & Recovery

Paulette Schwartz, LCSW, MPH, CPXP, Director of Human Centered Care, Hartford HealthCare Community Network

Michael Makowski, MPH, Epidemiologist, Community, Family Health, and Prevention

Branch/Chronic Disease and Injury Prevention Section/Injury and Violence Surveillance Unit, Connecticut Public Health

Kevin Burns, Transportation Rail Officer 2, CT Operation Lifesaver – State Coordinator, Connecticut Department of Transportation Public Transportation – Office of Rail – System Safety & Security

Bill Brassard, Senior Director, Communications, NSSF The Firearm Industry Trade Association,

Addressing suicide statewide requires a comprehensive approach that considers the many factors associated with risk and engages a broad range of stakeholders. Connecticut has a strong infrastructure dedicated to this work. One example is the Lethal Means Awareness and Prevention Committee of the Connecticut Suicide Advisory Board. Participants in this workshop will learn about the committee's history and future direction. A panel of members will discuss how data informs national and state efforts, along with recent initiatives such as Operation Lifesaver, Signs for Hope, "It's Okay to Talk About Suicide," and outreach and engagement with the firearms community.

#### **Workshop 4: We Matter Here: Belonging and Community as Suicide Prevention**

Reverend Dr. Odell Montgomery Cooper, Founder/President, Interruptions, LLC  
Dr. Keven McNeill, Founder/President, Quiet Corner Peer Support Group  
Ginger Smith, MSW, Founder, SOAR Together

Feelings of connection and belonging serve as powerful protective factors for many individuals across the lifespan who are experiencing feelings of social isolation. Featuring a panel of peer advocates and community builders currently "doing the work", this session will explore the power of creating environments of shared faith, life experience, and purpose where people can connect organically. Panelists will share real-life examples of how they've built spaces that provide opportunity for social engagement while inspiring participants to do the same.

#### **Workshop 5: Who Am I Now? Identity, Meaning-Making, and Hope After Suicide Loss**

Steven J. Karaiskos, PhD, Founder of Elpis Consulting, Coaching, & Community Building

This workshop invites participants to explore the question "Who Am I Now?" as it emerges across the suicide continuum through prevention, intervention, crisis response, and postvention. Building on identity-centered and grief-informed approaches, the session focuses on how experiences of suicidality and suicide loss can disrupt, reshape, and redefine a person's sense of self, belonging, and meaning. Drawing from lived experience, professional practice, and decades of work in education, suicide prevention, and postvention, the workshop emphasizes relational presence, emotional safety, and meaning-making rather than fixing or outcomes. Participants engage in guided reflection, narrative inquiry, and grounding practices designed to support both personal integration and professional sustainability. Rather than positioning hope as a passive feeling, the workshop frames hope as an active, relational process, something practiced through language, presence, and connection. Participants will be guided in developing a personal mantra.