HISTORY OF TENNESSEE SUICIDE PREVENTION NETWORK

1996

❖ Jerry and Elsie Weyrauch founded the Suicide Prevention Advocacy Network/United States of America (SPAN/USA) in response to their daughter's suicide. This is considered the start of the contemporary national suicide prevention movement.

1998

❖ Dr. Ken Tullis, a psychiatrist from Memphis, and his wife Madge attend the National Suicide Prevention Conference in Reno, Nevada. Upon their return to Tennessee, they established a campaign to "SPAN the State of Tennessee in 1998", developing a Tennessee-based suicide prevention movement.

1999

❖ U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher issued the Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent Suicide, in which he encourages the development of a national suicide prevention strategy for the entire United States as one of his major objectives.

❖ Ken and Madge accepted the Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent Suicide and with the help of Virginia Trotter Betts.

❖ The Weyrauch's advocacy for suicide awareness and prevention caught the attention of Surgeon General David Satcher as he was beginning to develop the first ever Surgeon General report on mental health.

❖ Virginia Trotter Betts was the policy advisor at Health and Human Services to Secretary Shalala and Dr. Satcher and was the HHS staff
lead for the development of both reports. After the intense national meeting in Las Vegas to seek consensus on need and content for such a report, she traveled home to Tennessee on the same airplane with Madge and Ken Tullis and personally encouraged them to develop a Tennessee focused strategy which they proceeded to do.

❖ Regional TN 10 Conferences – Spring 1999

- Dr. Tullis convened an expert panel to develop the Tennessee Strategy for Suicide Prevention by responding to each of the fifteen points in The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent Suicide 1999 published by the Department of Health and Human Services, Washington D.C. These strategies were submitted for consideration at the statewide Tennessee Suicide Prevention Conference (TSPC), October 7-8, 1999, in Nashville at the Regal Maxwell House. Co-chaired by the Tullises, this conference provided a forum to increase awareness of the risk of suicide, ways to recognize warning signs and symptoms, how to establish and maintain prevention programs and ways to assist Tennesseans in obtaining proper medical treatment when suicidal thoughts are present.

- At the Tennessee Suicide Prevention Conference, the Surgeon General's National Strategy was endorsed, and the Tennessee Suicide Prevention Strategy was presented to Dr. Wadley, Commissioner of the Department of Health, Elizabeth Rukeyser, Commissioner of the Department of Mental Health/Developmental Disabilities, George Hailey, Chair of the Mental Health Planning Council and other state public sector leaders. Both the public and private sector symbolically accepted responsibility for the Tennessee Strategy. Eight regions were challenged to further develop and begin implementation of the strategies.

- The vision for Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network (TSPN) was the result of the 1999 Conference. It consists of eight regions throughout the state under the operational coordination of the TSPN Executive Director who, in turn, collaborates with an Advisory Council appointed by the Governor of Tennessee. The Tullises served on the initial TSPN Advisory Council by appointment of Governor Bredesen.
**2000**

- First Tennessee Suicide Prevention Coordinator funded by TDMHD, Janice Johnson Brown, PhD. / First Suicide Prevention Advisory Council. Scott Ridgway becomes second Tennessee Suicide Prevention Coordinator and ultimately first Executive Director / Governor Don Sundquist appoints Suicide Prevention Advisory Council / TSPN is born.

**2001**

- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services formally released the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention on behalf of the Office of the Surgeon General. Meanwhile, the Tennessee Suicide Prevention Strategy is presented to state department heads and public sector leaders. Both the public and private sectors symbolically accept responsibility for the Tennessee Strategy.

- Participants in the Tennessee Suicide Prevention Conference established TSPN, with eight component regional networks established for local action on the Tennessee Strategy for Suicide Prevention. TSPN and the local networks were to be presided over by the operational coordination of an Executive Director and a gubernatorially appointed Advisory Council. The first meeting was held in October.

**2002**

- An Intra-State Departmental Group consisting of delegates from state departments and agencies was established to advise TSPN on public policy and implement organization objectives at the state department level.

- Lakeside Behavioral Health System started the first inpatient suicide prevention program in the U.S. under the guidance of Dr. Tullis.

- May 28 was declared Suicide Prevention Awareness Day in Tennessee.

- TSPN began publication of a quarterly newsletter and its first brochures on suicide risk within teens and older adults. TSPN certified 24 members as trainers in the Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training curriculum.
2003

- Phil Bredesen was elected Governor of Tennessee and Virginia Trotter Betts was appointed Tennessee Commissioner of Mental Health. Implementing the policy initiatives in both the Call to Action to Prevent Suicide (a narrow focus) and the Surgeon General’s Report on Mental Health (a broad, deep, and complex document) were her priorities.

- TSPN co-organized the Suicide and the Black Church Conference held in Memphis, along with pastors Diane and William Young, the first nationwide event dedicated to the subject of African American suicide within the faith community context. TSPN has been a part of every follow-up event since.

- TSPN developed and adopted a statewide youth suicide prevention plan and participated in Project Tennessee's creation of a school-based suicide prevention curriculum.

- The TSPN website, tspn.org, goes live.

- The first observance of Suicide Prevention Awareness Month in September was marked by numerous ads and billboards.

- On October 22, 2003, the Memphis/Shelby County Suicide Prevention Network (MSPN) was formally organized as one of eight regions under the operational coordination of TSPN.

- TSPN worked to eliminate the stigma of suicide, educate the community about the warning signs of suicide, and ultimately reduce the rate of suicide in our state.

- TSPN goals were to coordinate and implement the Tennessee Suicide Prevention Strategies, based on the U.S Surgeons General's "Call to Action to Prevent Suicide."

- Hickman County Suicide Prevention Taskforce was established with TSPN’s assistance.

- Virginia Trotter Betts served as Commissioner of Mental Health during the eight years of the Bredesen administration (2003-2011) which assured an advocate for suicide prevention as a priority in the department and allowed for funding, visibility, and growth. Thus, TSPN had financial support through a state government champion.
The influence of the Weyrauchs, the Tullises, and Clarke Flatt cannot be understated. Scott Ridgway was also a tremendous asset as the first Executive Director.

2004


- The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline began operation this year, and TSPN was one of its earliest and strongest proponents.

- TSPN published its first State of Suicide in Tennessee report, which would later become an annual publication of the organization.

- TSPN collected the first Suicide Prevention Awareness Month proclamations from mayors of city and county governments.

- TSPN trained forty members as instructors in the "Question, Persuade, and Refer" (QPR) suicide prevention curriculum, which would eventually become one of the organization’s primary mechanisms of suicide prevention gatekeeper training.

2005

- Administrative oversight of TSPN was acquired by the Mental Health Association of Middle Tennessee, a merger which opened TSPN to additional resources and contacts under the National Mental Health Association (Mental Health America) umbrella.

- TSPN submitted an application to SAMHSA's State-Sponsored Youth Suicide Prevention and Early Intervention Program on behalf of the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities and was accepted into the first group of grantees selected. Acceptance into the program allowed for the establishment of the Tennessee Lives Count (TLC) Project, a statewide early intervention/prevention project intended to reduce suicides and suicide attempts for youth aged 10-24 within an emphasis on suicide prevention gatekeeper training.
TSPN's newsletter was re-launched as a monthly feature, entitled the *TSPN Call to Action*.

Giles County Suicide Prevention Taskforce was created with TSPN's assistance.

**2006**

- TSPN, along with the state of Tennessee itself, receives the SPAN-USA Allies for Action Award in recognition of its suicide prevention efforts, the first time the award was ever given to a collective body rather than to an individual.

- The first of the "Love Never Dies" memorial quilts was dedicated to personalize and humanize the problem of suicide. Note: The memorial quilt project has continued every year since it began in 2006 as a way to bring openness rather than shame to the issue of suicide.

- The Regional Suicide Prevention Awards were established with persons to be nominated by each of the eight regions. The Madge & Ken Tullis Suicide Prevention Award was established to honor one region’s awardee chosen from the eight by an Advisory Council Committee.

- TSPN's Southeast Region established a postvention team in the Chattanooga area, with members on call by local law enforcement in the event of a suicide death. It is the first such group of its kind ever documented.

- DeKalb County Suicide Prevention Taskforce was established with the assistance of TSPN.

**2007**

- TSPN proved influential in the passage of the Jason Flatt Act of 2007 in Tennessee, which mandated the inclusion of two hours of youth suicide prevention training for all public school staff. At the time of its passage, it was the most intensive youth suicide prevention education law in the nation. It was later replicated in several other states.

- A grant from the Tennessee Department of Health financed the recruitment and education of additional suicide prevention instructors.
2008

❖ TSPN observed the ten-year anniversary of the national suicide prevention movement with a symposium held in September. It also started the 10-Tenn Challenge contest, a competition between TSPN regional networks to develop the most innovative and far-reaching suicide prevention activity.

❖ TSPN began providing logistical support to Fort Campbell's Suicide Prevention Program, establishing connections to mental health and social service entities within the U.S. Army and the base community.

2009

❖ TLC concluded its first grant cycle, having provided training to thousands of people across the state. In its next grant cycle, it focused on training for staff of juvenile justice facilities. The outcomes of this grant cycle ultimately lead to the development of Shield of Care, an evidence-based suicide prevention and intervention training curriculum for juvenile justice staff.

❖ TSPN published its Older Adult Suicide Prevention Plan, outlining strategies for preventing suicide within this high-risk age group.

❖ TSPN began its emergency room brochure holder project, providing literature from TSPN and partner agencies to emergency departments across the state. A substance abuse outreach program established “Pledge to Prevent Suicide.”

❖ TSPN staged its Suicide Prevention Awareness and Educational Event series across the state during September.

2010

❖ As part of TSPN's Election 2010 project, major candidates in this year's governor's race provided information on their plans for suicide prevention and mental health during Advisory Council meetings.

❖ Davidson County Suicide Prevention Taskforce was established in collaboration with the Nashville Metro Public Health Department.
2011

❖ TSPN established its Substance Abuse Outreach Program to provide suicide prevention training for professionals in the substance abuse treatment field and received funding for fulltime Substance Abuse Outreach Coordinator.

❖ TSPN held a 10th Anniversary Symposium.

2012

❖ As part of its "Pledge to Prevent Suicide" project, TSPN collected over 2,000 signatures from members of the public voicing their support for consistent funding of suicide prevention activities in the state of Tennessee.

❖ The Rutherford Suicide Prevention Coalition created as well as the Montgomery-Houston-Humphreys-Stewart (MHHS) Taskforce.

❖ When the Tullises rotated off the Advisory Council in 2012, the Council created the "Emeritus Member" position to honor their roles as co-founders of TSPN.

2013

❖ TSPN rolled out its Gun Safety Project, a statewide project intended to address firearm suicide deaths in Tennessee.

❖ TSPN reinvented itself on social media with a regularly updated Facebook page, Twitter feed, and the blog "TSPN on Tumblr". It also created the TSPN App, a readily available reference for locally available suicide prevention resources, available on iTunes.

❖ TSPN launched Out of the Shadows, a newsletter for survivors of suicide, and can you hear me?, a publication for survivors of suicide attempts. Each edition of these bimonthly newsletters included articles and poetry associated with the grief and recovery process. It also included artwork from various sources. Priority was given to content submitted by people within the state of Tennessee.
2014

- TSPN's Advisory Council formally endorsed the Zero Suicide Initiative and formed the Zero Suicide Initiative Task Force to coordinate its implementation within the state's behavioral health facilities.

- TSPN hired the first of three Regional Coordinators charged with facilitating TSPN educational and outreach projects in each of the Grand Regions of Tennessee.

- The TSPN Advisory Council Emeriti Association (informally called the Emeritus Group) was established in 2014 to recognize TSPN Advisory Council members who had rotated off the group but still wanted to remain actively involved with TSPN projects and activities, and to honor Council members who had provided outstanding service to TSPN and to suicide prevention efforts within our state.

2015

- TSPN formed a partnership with Your Heart on Art, Inc., a nonprofit that promoted emotional healing through therapeutic art workshops, to stage the first of a series of traveling art projects by survivors of suicide loss and suicide attempts. These exhibits were displayed at venues across the state, including Suicide Prevention Awareness Month events.

- The TSPN website was overhauled to ensure better compatibility with mobile devices and the inclusion of more current resources.

- Over 300 people attended TSPN's Suicide Prevention Symposium held July 28-29 in Nashville. The symposium included a variety of breakout sessions, presentations on emerging developments within the suicide prevention movement, and two presentations from documentarian Lisa Klein on former and current projects.

- TSPN partnered with the Tennessee chapters of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) to support that year’s "Out of the Darkness" Community Walks, held across the state during September and October.

- TSPN hosted several Training for Trainers (T4T) courses for the month of October across the state of Tennessee. These courses were part of
an effort to embed trainers in evidence-based suicide prevention curricula (specifically, ASIST, AMSR, QPR, and suicide2Hope) within community mental health agencies, state departments, and partners with the Tennessee Higher Education Suicide Prevention Network and the Zero Suicide Initiative.

2016

- TSPN worked with the Jared’s Keepers Foundation, the Jason Foundation, and the Tennessee chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) to promote the “Jared’s Law” expansion to the Jason Flatt Act of 2007 within the Tennessee General Assembly, culminating in Governor Bill Haslam signing the bill into law on March 22.

- Jared’s Law extended previously existing requirements for public school teachers to include all staff within Tennessee public schools. Additionally, the law authorized the Tennessee Department of Education to establish a model policy to help school districts create their own policies. This model was developed in consultation with TSPN, AFSP, the Office of Crisis Services and Suicide Prevention within the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, the Jason Foundation, Inc., JFI, Inc., and other agencies.

- A webinar sponsored by the Injury Control Research Center for Suicide Prevention (ICRC-S) spotlighted TSPN as an example of a successful statewide suicide prevention program. “Evaluation of the Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network (TSPN): A Research Collaboration among the TSPN, the Centerstone Research Institute (CRI), and the Tennessee Department of Health” took place on March 18, with mental health and suicide prevention professionals from across the United States participating.

- The presentation summarized a collaborative research project focused on evaluating TSPN facilitated and CRI with the guidance of RTI, analyzing its successes in implementing a statewide suicide prevention strategy. It was the result of over a year of research that included interviews with key TSPN volunteers. The slides from the webinar - as well as a full audio recording - are available on the ICRC-S website.

- TSPN established a partnership with the Crisis Text Line, providing it with unprecedented access to real-time data on crisis intervention and mental health needs within the state of Tennessee.
### 2017

- TSPN worked with mental health and suicide prevention advocates across the state to promote the Kenneth and Madge Tullis, MD, Suicide Prevention Training Act of 2017 within the Tennessee General Assembly, culminating in Governor Bill Haslam signing the bill into law on June 21. The legislation required licensed counselors in Tennessee to complete two hours of suicide prevention training every five years. The bill ensured that counselors in Tennessee are trained in suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention protocols.

- TSPN established a Higher Education Suicide Prevention Task Force, the first known instance of a statewide taskforce dedicated to this issue anywhere in the country.

- TSPN’s three monthly or bi-monthly newsletters were consolidated into a single electronic version. The *TSPN Call to Action* continues to feature information on local and national suicide prevention projects and educational opportunities.

### 2018

- TSPN promoted the passage of the Suicide Prevention Act of 2018, which authorized the Commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Health to create a suicide prevention program within the Department.

- TSPN established two new task forces this year in partnership with state departments. The Tennessee Veterans Suicide Prevention Task Force worked with the Tennessee Department of Veteran Services to provide unique resources for service members, veterans, and their families. Meanwhile, the Tennessee Farmers Suicide Prevention Task Force began work with the Tennessee Department of Agriculture to address suicide and mental health issues within agricultural professions.

### 2019

- TSPN updated and rebranded all its brochures and resource directories, introducing additional resources such as a suicide screening badge attachment for clinicians, incorporating elements of the Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale (C-SSRS).
Tennessee became the steward and curator of the International Suicide Memorial Wall following its relocation from its previous base in Columbia and held a formal dedication ceremony.

TSPN added several new regional directors to its staff, realizing the TSPN’s long-held ambition of establishing an official staff coordinator within each TSPN region. Also, TSPN’s Rural West Region split into the Northwest and Southwest Regions.

2020

TSPN rapidly responded to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, successfully converting its meetings, training sessions, and even its statewide and regional Suicide Prevention Awareness Month events to virtual formats.

Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services’ contract with Mental Health America of the Mid-South to provide administrative oversight to TSPN was awarded to the Tennessee Association of Alcohol, Drug, and other Addiction Services (TAADAS), effective July 1 of 2020. TAADAS absorbed all existing staff and the carryover funds associated with its grants. The contract transfer had the benefit of making TSPN literature available to order at no cost through the TAADAS Clearinghouse.

TSPN hired a Data and Communications Director to coordinate TSPN’s data reporting and consolidation and to oversee TSPN communications in print, on our website, and via our social media channels.

TSPN established the First Responder Task Force to help law enforcement, fire department, and emergency medical service personnel respond to suicides and suicidal ideation among the people they serve and their colleagues.

The Veterans Suicide Prevention Task Force finalized TSPN's Veterans Toolkit of Recommendations and Resources.

Misty Leitsch served as Interim Executive Director and then Executive Director
2021

- TSPN began accepting state and federal funding from both TDMHSAS and the Tennessee Department of Health (TDH), with unique scopes and outcomes associated with each grant. The TDH grant funded a Zero Suicide Coordinator and the position that eventually became the Youth Program Manager.

- TSPN established a Deputy Director position to identify and operationalize program area goals and issues for Regional Directors, team leads, Advisory Council, co-workers, and volunteers. TSPN also redeveloped the Executive Assistant position to provide administrative service to both TAADAS and TSPN.

2022

- The Executive Committee of TSPN’s Advisory Council published an Executive Statement addressing and clarifying the change of the fiscal agent, TSPN’s growing program staff, and the structure for agency oversight. It set forth the Governor’s proclamation establishing TSPN and the Advisory Council bylaws as the governing documents of the TSPN Advisory Council. The Executive Statement added information on roles defined by contracts or other documents previously outside the Advisory Council structure.

- TDH grant funding expanded to include an ESSENCE Alert Director, charged with assisting TDH with the use of the ESSENCE system to monitor weekly trends in suicidal behavior and identify regions/counties seeing increased incidents of persons reporting to an emergency department for suicide-related behavior.

- Mary Linden Salter became acting Executive Director of TSPN beginning October.
2023

❖ TSPN’s Memphis/Shelby County Region reorganized into the Greater Memphis Region after taking over responsibility for Fayette and Tipton Counties from the Southwest Region.

❖ TSPN reorganized its central office staff, consolidating the Data and Communications Director position and the Deputy Director post into a single Director of Operations.

❖ TSPN staff and the Advisory Council drafted guidelines for TSPN activities for use as a historical reference and to brief new staff members. They ultimately split these guidelines into a historical document and a set of protocols incorporating the TSPN Executive Statement.

❖ The Advisory Council formed an Exploratory Committee to investigate the advisability of TSPN becoming a 501c3 nonprofit.

❖ In October, Anna Sever, was appointed as the third Executive Director of TSPN. Her vision includes further leveraging the regional network, statewide staff, partners across the state to pair Tennesseans at risk for suicide-related thoughts and behaviors with more timely and less restrictive access to prevention and ongoing treatment services.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~