



Suicidal Patient on Hospital Grounds: A Simulation Exercise at Access Hospital Response

By: Natalie Nedza BSN, MSN, RN

Each day in the United States, 20 Veterans commit suicide. Unfortunately, these tragic events also occur on hospital property (Military Times, 2019). These statistics led the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) to focus on suicide prevention as a national priority, while partnering with communities to address this crisis (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2019). To assess how the Iowa City VA Health Care System would respond to a suicidal Veteran on hospital grounds, an interdisciplinary simulation-based exercise was developed utilizing a standardized patient.

The goal of the exercise was to assess the hospital's response to an actively suicidal patient on-campus. Areas of assessment included emergency response, employee response, communication and notification plans.

To accurately assess the hospital's response, the simulation event was unannounced. The scenario began with the standardized patient calling the hospital and requesting to speak with the inpatient Mental Health Unit. As planned, the standardized patient was inadvertently transferred to an inpatient, non-mental health unit. Next, the nurse answering the call used Caller in Crisis, a locally developed communication tool, to alert the VA Police and the Suicide Prevention Team that a suicidal patient was on the phone.

The scenario continued with the nurse asking for the patient's name and address. The standardized patient, as planned, did not disclose their information to the hospital employee and became increasingly distressed. With no contact information, the standardized patient was asked to report to the Emergency Department for evaluation. After agreeing, the patient immediately ended the call.

Upon arrival to the Emergency Department, the standardized patient became agitated when the employees mentioned the potential for admission to the hospital. Immediately following the admission discussion, the patient fled from the Emergency Department and ran toward the top level of the parking garage, eventually threatening to jump. The conclusion of the simulation event occurred after several employees responded to the event site. Mental Health providers, VA Police, Emergency Department staff and members of the Behavioral Emergency Response Team engaged with the patient and deescalated the situation.