

# Public Health Social Work & the Nation

A typical week for public health social worker **Elana Premack Sandler** (SSW '05, SPH '06 ) can involve speaking with a military captain about the spike in suicides in the army, organizing strategic planning training for suicide prevention advocates in Washington, D.C., attending presentations on mental health stigma by the National Institutes of Health, and participating in discussions about the implications of research findings for the suicide prevention field.

Elana is a Prevention Specialist with the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, a national technical assistance and resource center that focuses on suicide prevention through capacity building and professional development. Helping states and communities to implement and evaluate suicide prevention programs, she regularly draws on public health and social work theories, and applies them, examining the risks, protective factors, and interventions at individual, peer, family, community, and societal levels.

One of Elana's goals is to encourage the grantees she works with to explore the ways in which they can sustain their programs without federal funding, "to get them thinking about what types of partnerships they want to build and what policies they need to have in place."

In addition to helping programs and populations, Elana understands that individuals are part of the public health equation. Due to the nature of her work, she says, "The hardest part is the content area. Often enough, I interact with people who have lost a loved one to suicide. The emotions can be raw and the stories are always moving." Nevertheless, she cites the most exciting aspects of her profession as the teaching moments: "When I am having a conversation with someone about applying a theory or research finding to their practice, and the idea just clicks for them."

While she works to develop suicide prevention capacity, she also recognizes that she is part of an early wave of public health social workers who are addressing suicide in a systemic way, and the outcomes of her work may not be readily apparent. "Because suicide prevention is a relatively new and small field," Elana says, "another outcome [of my work] is greater political awareness

and support for a public health approach to this issue.

Advancing beyond treating individuals to preventing suicide at the population level is another outcome."

Undoubtedly, Elana credits her training in public health and social work with giving her the ability to translate research and theory into practice. She recognizes that melding a public health approach into social work is valuable, and reports encountering varied partners and practitioners who don't yet know what public health social work can do. "I've been surprised by people's limited views of each field," she says. Public health social work is important because she says, "It's interdisciplinary nature is essential to creating comprehensive approaches to solving social and health problems."



Elana Premack Sandler

The Campaign for Public Health Social Work  
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