

## Guidelines for Planning Multi-Faith Campus Vigil

**Vigil:** *A corporate gathering for mourning or observing loss.*

Loss is a physical, emotional, and spiritual experience for humans.

Acknowledging loss is a key first step toward healing. A corporate gathering to mourn or observe loss provides the beginning stages for physical, emotional, and spiritual healing for the group. Members of a school who receive no spiritual care in the aftermath of sudden loss can be left feeling void and despondent. Vigils provide senses of support, honoring, and collegiality, leaving members feeling hopeful in spite of great loss.



When conducted by a single faith group, vigils involve prayers and scripture readings reflective of that faith tradition. When leaders conduct an ecumenical or interfaith vigil, they must consider carefully how to make the gathering meaningful for all participants.

### Preparation

- ✓ When possible, create a template during peace to adapt later in times of crisis.
- ✓ Consider leaders to be involved who represent major and marginal groups in the campus environment.
  - Administration
  - Local faith communities
  - Law enforcement
  - Mental health professionals and service providers
  - Student groups
- ✓ Establish relationships with these groups and agencies as soon as possible, and, ideally, in times of peace.

## Planning

Invite representatives from key groups to gather for the purpose of creating a mutually shared template. Some groups find it helpful to role-play, imagining a potential scenario that just occurred. Together, consider the following questions:

- ✓ Where will a campus vigil be held? On campus or off?
- ✓ Who will be invited? And how large an event might it be?
- ✓ Who needs to be made aware of the gathering and how will the event be communicated to them?
  - Attendees
  - Law enforcement? Town, city, or county officials?
  - Are any permits required?
- ✓ Who will participate in the leadership of the event?
  - Speakers?
  - Statements? Prayers? Scripture?
    - Some campuses share caring sentiments, without mention of specific religious phrasing. Other campuses allow representatives from local faith groups to share prayers and readings representative of traditions reflected among the staff, faculty, and student bodies present.
    - Consider the manner sentiments are presented. Some schools fear mentioning anything religious necessarily implies directives. It is all in how it is presented. Vigils are not appropriate times for education, conversions, or explicit directives. Vigils hold space for heartache, questioning, and grief. Seek to respect the spirituality of those who are gathered. When phrased respectfully, faith sentiments can represent members of the group gathered without directing others to comply unduly. Encourage respect and equal representation without discrimination.
  - Music?
- ✓ Rituals?
  - Candle-lighting, walking or marching, writing prayers or meaningful sentiments, drawing on posters, sharing mementos or symbols

- What supplies are needed? Can you work together as neighboring agencies to provide supplies?
- ✓ How long will the vigil be?
  - Generally, programming is between 30-45 minutes. Sometimes, this includes or is followed by times of silence, walking, or small group gatherings
- ✓ Be sure to include a statement about where members of the school can locate qualified people for further assistance with grief and sorrow, including local faith leaders, school or local mental health professionals, and other helpful local agencies. While vigils are not appropriate times for education, conversions, or explicit directives, times of significant loss often lead people of any age to seek more spiritual guidance. It is very helpful, during and at the close of a vigil, to direct participants to helpful locations where questions of loss, mental health, and spirituality can be effectively met.

### Maintaining

Create a communication mechanism among local faith leaders and mental health professionals

- ✓ Identify a qualified person to hold responsibility for maintaining effective communication for the group.
- ✓ Determine mutually-agreed upon guidelines for assisting survivors and grieving family members.
  - It is best for representatives of survivors and families' faith traditions, if they have one, to be available
  - It is best when mental health professionals who respond to survivors and families are trained in responding to the type of crisis that occurred. If that is not available, consider reaching out to a neighboring community who may be able to put survivors and families in touch with trained responders.

Gather together periodically to keep established relationships and review vigil template from time to time for any necessary changes to reflect the group accurately