

An aerial view of a city street. A red car is on the left, a yellow car is on the right. Pedestrians are walking on the sidewalks. The street has white lane markings and a green-painted curb.

Suicide can happen in your garage.

What one parking professional
learned about preventing tragedy.

A pair of black leather shoes is placed on a white ledge. Below the ledge, a city street is visible with several people lying on the ground, suggesting a tragedy. The shoes are positioned as if they belong to someone looking down at the scene.

SAVING LIVES

By **Larry J. Cohen, CAPP**

THIS IS THE STORY I NEVER WANTED TO WRITE. I have published many stories over the years but fought the urge to share my experiences on a topic we would hope to never encounter as parking professionals: dealing with a suicide from one of our garages. Part of my reasoning? I didn't want to be known as the "parking garage suicide expert." Can you blame me?

But that was a selfish thought, and after a lot of reflection, I believe sharing my experiences in dealing with a rash of suicides from our garage during the past two years and providing both reactive and proactive measures will make this my most important article.

If my story motivates you to put initiatives in place for suicide prevention and saves lives, there really isn't a better one to be written.



Fencing and signage was installed on the garage's top floor.

An Iconic Site?

During the past two years, I have dealt with five suicides at one of our garages.

The Prince Street Garage (also home to my office) has become an iconic symbol in our community. Iconic is good and bad: The structure is the highest open-air facility in the downtown with a great view from the roof. The diversity of activities on the roof is like a center city square. In one typical week, a commercial was filmed, the next day we caught folks having sex in a car, the following day we found a drug user shooting up, and the next weekend had a sunbather and then a wedding party taking pictures with the beautiful city and country hills in the background.

Can your garage become an iconic site? Like many bridges and other highly visible, easily accessible locations (e.g., the Golden Gate Bridge), you may not have a choice. But how do you deal with it from a suicide prevention perspective?

Having dealt with suicides in the past at other parking programs I have overseen, the garage was never the focal point of a suicide but just the place where the suicide occurred. Several cases included individuals

with terminal cancer deciding they didn't want to go through that kind of slow painful death, so they went directly from the hospital to the garage and jumped. It's a terrible situation, but the blame and focus were never on the garage.

I had a hard time understanding why the focus would be on the facility and not the person and what would cause them to commit such an unimaginable act. Iconic site or not, after three suicides in a two-month span, I decided that an aggressive proactive game plan was warranted.

Policies

The first action was to establish a zero-tolerance policy for anyone on the roof of the garage who wasn't coming to/from a vehicle, regardless of his or her reasoning. Even if the reason for being on the garage is to take a picture or conduct a video shoot, permission is required.

The next step was to put in place no-trespassing signage within the guidelines of the city defiant-trespass warning. With these signs posted in place, staff and police could enforce our internal zero-tolerance policy for pedestrians on the roof.

After three suicides in a two-month span, I decided that an aggressive proactive game plan was warranted.



Fencing was installed on the top two floors of a tall garage to serve as a suicide deterrent.

No matter what you do, there is no 100 percent guarantee of avoiding future suicides by installing fencing. Make sure your stakeholders are aware of that!

Partners in Prevention

I put together a Suicide Summit of law enforcement, community members, board members, staff, and mental health professionals from the city, county, and state to discuss how we could best deal with the situation of suicides from the garages.

Not surprisingly, from this group was an overwhelming response in support of prevention as the best possible solution. One of the initiatives we undertook included posting suicide prevention posters with a local crisis number to call, instead of the national suicide prevention hotline. Mental health professionals felt the response would be better with a local number.

We also discussed installing a direct hotline phone strategically placed at areas on the roof. Ultimately, we decided to defer this initiative as the cost/benefit didn't seem to make the most sense at the time.

Training

Managers, several staff members, and I went through suicide prevention training. There are several good programs available for non-health care professionals. The one recommended to us is called QPR for "Question, Persuade, and Refer." At the end of the three-hour session, my staff felt comfortable that if they encountered someone on the roof or over the phone, they would be able to talk to them until police were contacted and respond to the scene. To date, we have encountered several other individuals contemplating suicide and have kept them from harming themselves.

We now know how to handle a potential suicide situation, but just as important is asking how your staff, and potentially even customers, will handle a suicide scene. Are they emotionally prepared? Not to be morbid, but there are some people who can view a

dead body on the sidewalk and not be affected while others will feel traumatized dealing with something no one should have to see in their lifetime. Be prepared to deal with your staff and anyone else who may encounter any aspect of a suicide and offer professional help to those in need.

Legal and Insurance

After seeking input from various legal professionals, insurance providers, and peers, I struggled for a long time with what action should be taken to stop the pattern of suicides from the garage. The issue was also debated in newspaper editorials with historical facts of incidents over the years throughout the country. But it basically boils down to "you're damned if you do and damned if you don't." Half the attorneys and insurance professionals say you must do something because you have been put on notice based on the number of incidents that have occurred in a relatively short period of time. The other half say if you do something such as putting in place a physical barrier, you should do the same to the entire garage and all your other garages to ensure you keep the same level of consistency. For someone who is usually firm in his decisions, I deliberated on this issue a very long time. Your specific situation and pertinent input from key stakeholders will help you determine which direction you go.

Security Measures

Fencing

Garages are not prisons that keep pedestrians from moving in and out freely. In many cases it is not feasible to retrofit an entire garage with fencing, whether for suicide prevention or theft. But there are cases in



which this has happened. Cost is a major consideration, even though there should not be cost associated with saving lives. The reality is cost is always a consideration, especially for a small municipal authority. But this is what we faced as we worked toward eliminating the iconic landmark status of our garage as a suicide destination.

I decided to fence the top two levels of the garage. Bids came in at between \$40,000 and \$120,000 for the two upper levels of one garage. If you choose fencing, make

sure you use small chain-link fencing that's at least eight feet high, which prohibits someone from climbing the fence if they somehow have the strength and motivation to do so. Recent precedent for garage fencing comes directly from iconic suicide bridges that include the Golden Gate, whose authority has budgeted millions of dollars for fencing and netting.

Even with this financial commitment, someone can still jump by just moving down several levels lower. We made the commitment to do something; the caveat is that this does not eliminate the potential for suicides in the future but eliminates this happening from the roof. Suicides can happen from the second level of a garage. But this was our first step as a deterrent. Fencing in other areas can be added in the future. No matter what you do, there is no 100 percent guarantee of avoiding future suicides by installing fencing. Make sure your stakeholders are aware of that!

Geofencing

We explored geofencing as an alternative and/or addition to chain link fencing. Geofencing technology provides closed-circuit television camera coverage in a layout specific to your structure that provides for alerts and notifications that you specify. If someone penetrates that invisible barrier, many things can happen—a zoom-in on his or her face, to a voice coming from a loudspeaker, to bright white lights illuminating. The best example of the use of this technology is to alert operations to someone jumping a fence at a nuclear power plant. The motion triggers an alert that someone is climbing a fence. The person monitoring the system reacts by an established script on how to react. Will this system alert you to someone on the roof? Yes. Can this be a deterrent to a suicide? Maybe. But maybe it causes the individual to run and jump out of panic.

Security Patrols

With zero-tolerance for anyone on the roof, staff who drive company vehicles are directed to pass through the roof level prior to returning to the office. This provides for a level of eyes and ears within the facility on a consistent basis. At night, we park one of our logo-marked vehicles at strategic locations throughout the garage, giving anyone walking in that area the sense that personnel are nearby and inferring that they are not alone in the facility, whether late at night, early morning, or daytime.

If you were to lay a typical garage flat, the square footage would be the size of five football fields. It is simply impossible to cover all of it and be there at just the right time. The best we can do is provide physical security and give the perception that a person would be caught before being able to jump from one of our garages.

We scan police and hospital scanners. Many times, they will put out alerts that someone has left the hospital and may be heading over to the garage as they are contemplating jumping. This will give your operation a head start on a potential individual entering your facility.

Landscaping

Trees can be planted along the perimeter of garages to provide a deterrent against jumping from a location that does not provide an open landing area. Once again, it's a terrible thing to think about, but in prevention of suicides from your garages, everything needs to be evaluated.

Dealing with the Press

Whether we like it or not, suicides from garages are newsworthy. The local newspaper ran multiple stories with varying story angles when we experienced this situation. One story even outlined with dashes the path from the roof to the sidewalk, and up to five television stations covered the story.

Don't feed into the sensationalizing of a tragic event. As the spokesperson, stress as much as possible that the story on the subject include initiatives for prevention, awareness of mental health issues, and empathy. If you are not comfortable dealing with the press under these circumstances, take a media relations class; the one offered by IPI (parking.org) is excellent.

I had been alerted by our mayor to avoid reading public comments in the paper, but I couldn't help myself. I wanted to gauge public perception and reaction. I should have listened to our mayor. Many are mean-spirited, and some even said I was responsible for the suicides because I didn't act quickly enough to deter the next one.

I encourage you to be proactive and prepared for what may never happen, rather than improvise when the unimaginable occurs. Begin the conversation now, before emotions, stress, and the media are at your door. I hope it never happens in your facility, but I also hope you'll learn from our experiences and be as prepared as possible.



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