

# Primary care targeted for suicide prevention efforts

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Dr. Judith Salzer is Associate Dean for Strategic Management at the Georgia Health Sciences University College of Nursing. Credit: Phil Jones

Forty-five percent of the 32,000 Americans who take their own lives each year visit their primary care provider within one month of their death. Ninety percent have a mental health or substance abuse disorder, or both. Yet only in the last decade has suicide been considered a preventable public health problem.

"In our society, we have separated [mental health](#) and physical health for quite some time," said Dr. Judith Salzer, Associate Dean for Strategic Management at the Georgia Health Sciences University College of

Nursing. Salzer, a primary care pediatric nurse practitioner who has spent her career specializing in the care of vulnerable [children](#), is one of a select group of experts participating in a Call to Action on Suicide Prevention in Primary Care Practice April 11-12 in Portland, Ore.

The meeting, sponsored by the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, the only federally funded center of its kind in the nation, and the American Association of Suicidology brings together physicians, social workers, nurses, researchers and government agencies to develop ideas and methods that would increase the capacity of primary care practices to assess and manage [suicide risk](#).

"This hasn't been done before," Salzer said. "The most basic mental health occurs in primary care settings where practitioners have hands-on contact with patients. We want to set up a national network to let primary care providers know how critical their impact is and give them acceptable tools with which to identify patients at risk for suicide."

The group will identify ways for providers to better recognize and respond to patients' suicidal thoughts and behaviors and to develop organizational plans that incorporate [suicide prevention](#) activities into primary care practices.

"There aren't enough mental health professionals for everyone to get a mental health checkup," Salzer said. "We want to make sure primary care providers have a practical way to incorporate mental health awareness into their assessments. A quick, standardized screening will tell pretty quickly if someone is feeling like they may hurt themselves."

Provided by Georgia Health Sciences University

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