

# A community-based approach to suicide prevention

*State grant supports mental health work in Twin Cities' African immigrant and refugee community.*

by **Andy Steiner**

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Participants in Restoration for All's after-school programs for girls helped at a recent community gathering focused on mental health in Brooklyn Center. Back row, from left to right, Glory John-Kolawole, Jihan Ibrahim, Heritage Aluko, Ayomide Salu. Front row, left to right, Fardosa Ali, Peace Aluko. Credit: MinnPost photo by Andy Steiner

One Saturday in February, Tolulope Ola, Ph.D., the founder and executive director of [Restoration for All](#), a community-based, African-led nonprofit, stood in the sanctuary of Christ Miracle Church Mission Worldwide on East 7<sup>th</sup> Street in St. Paul. Gathered around her was a group of people ranging from young to middle-aged — mostly members of the Twin Cities African immigrant and refugee community.

Ola, dressed professionally in a dark skirt and blazer, was there to lead a discussion about an important topic, one that she said doesn't get talked about enough. The event, billed as a "facilitated conversation on changing the narrative around mental health and suicide prevention," was an opportunity for community members to talk about mental illness and how to recognize and respond when friends, colleagues or family members exhibit signs of struggle.

"We want to identify the risks and potential factors that indicate a person may be actively suicidal," Ola told the group. "We want to recognize the signs of people at risk for suicide or severe mental illness. And we want to empower the community to use the right language when talking about mental health and suicide prevention."

This event was one of a number organized by Ola and her colleagues at Restoration for All. In July 2023, the organization was awarded a four-year, \$400,000 [Comprehensive Suicide Prevention grant](#) from the [Minnesota Department of Health](#) (MDH), and conversations like this one are part of the coalition-building and data-collection phase of the grant's first year.

Ola said that she decided to apply for the competitive grant — which was awarded to 10 Minnesota nonprofits including [AinDahYung Center](#), [NAMI Minnesota](#) and [Otter Tail County Public Health](#) — after taking part in a MDH strategic planning cohort.

"I was with the program for a year or two working on how we can plan in the community to get to know and define if our members are ready to go a step further and make a change around mental health and suicide," she explained.

During the time that Ola was part of the cohort, she said the Nigerian community saw an uptick in youth suicide. Because the church plays a central role in the community, Ola, who is Nigerian, said, "We were able to trace these young people back to the churches and get to know more about how they fell through the cracks." What she learned, Ola said, was that the young people who died by suicide were "not getting outside mental health treatment and not getting counseling in church."

This realization made Ola feel confident that more work needed to be done to increase community members' comfort with talking about mental health and suicide. In many immigrant communities, she said, conversation



about mental health is avoided out of fear, bias or misunderstanding. “That kind of behavior can be dangerous,” she said.

Ola felt that the best way to get the message out about mental health and suicide prevention was to focus on respected community-based organizations, including churches and mosques. She applied for the grant because she wanted to launch a comprehensive program to educate as many people as possible.



Tolulope Ola, Ph.D.: “We want to recognize the signs of people at risk for suicide or severe mental illness. And we want to empower the community to use the right language when talking about mental health and suicide prevention.” Credit: Supplied

“We decided we needed to do a lot in the community, especially the faith-based community and the community at large,” Ola said. “We saw the need to do training on changing the narrative around suicide prevention and mental health first aid. We wanted people to know that just like we have CPR to save lives, mental health first aid is just as important.” And because community members respect their pastors and imams, Ola added, she needed to bring them into the conversation as well. “It is good to have faith-based leaders trained to recognize if a child is actually struggling and know where to refer them for help,” she said.

## ‘More people at the table’

Suicide-prevention specialists at MDH wanted to create a grant program that would reach people in the settings where they feel comfortable and supported, explained Tanya Carter, MDH suicide prevention supervisor.



Tanya Carter

“The purpose of the Comprehensive Suicide Prevention Grant is to help build community coalitions to direct and develop a data-driven plan to promote mental health and prevent suicidal experiences,” Carter said. She explained that through the grant, organizations like Restoration for All are leading a coordinated effort within their communities in a way that outsiders could not.

“One goal of the grant is to develop prevention coalitions within communities, gather additional partners that maybe they didn’t know existed and bring them together to work to develop a comprehensive, customized approach to suicide prevention within their community,” Carter said.

Distributing the grant money to a range of community based organizations was part of the program’s design, Carter said. She and her colleagues want information about suicide prevention to reach as many Minnesotans as possible. “We all know we work better when we have more people at the table, more brains to help get the word out.”

Every community has its own unique way of communicating, Carter said. “I always use my faith community as an example,” she said. “What is done in my faith community is different from what is done in your faith community. Meeting within the community and having a deep understanding of community members is important to creating a plan that has a sustainable future.”

Ola said that Restoration for All is well positioned to head the MDH grant effort in the African immigrant and refugee community. “Our vision is to build culturally resilient communities by reconnecting people with their culture,” she said. That focus, combined with an innate understanding of the African immigrant and refugee experience, will help Ola and her staff create a suicide prevention plan that best serves their friends and neighbors.

The grant’s four-year life cycle will give participating organizations the time needed to establish an effective suicide-prevention program with lasting community impact, Carter said. While the grant process provides an overall framework, the real work of designing and implementing a plan is up to the individual organization.

“I think all communities have unique aspects that they bring to the table in how they talk about suicide and mental health,” Carter said. “They are the experts in their community and how they can best move the work on suicide prevention efforts within their community.”

## **A new way of thinking**

Creating an effective suicide-prevention program in the Twin Cities’ African immigrant and refugee community will require a change in attitudes about mental illness and suicide, Ola said. Old cultural beliefs remain strong, even among well-intentioned community members. It will take time, patience and education to shift those ways of thinking.

One Sunday not so long ago, Ola was at church when she overheard a conversation.

“One parent said they heard their child make a comment about hearing voices and didn’t know what to do about that,” she said. “Too many people in the community want to ignore signs of mental illness because they are ashamed.”

Ola sees conversations like these as an opportunity for education and connection building. On another late-winter Sunday, she listened as a fellow parishioner talked about an acquaintance who was suicidal. “She was using some of the words that need to be changed,” Ola said. “She said, ‘she wanted to commit suicide.’”

Ola knows that that shame-filled phrase likens ending one’s life to committing a sin, so she took the opportunity to tell her fellow church members about an informational session on mental health and suicide. “I stood up and said, ‘We have this mental health training going on,’ and 10 people registered immediately.”

The MDH grant money will help to fund training and facilitated community discussions, Ola said. “We are looking for the ‘cultural healing’ component. We want to find new ways for connecting people and be creative around racialized trauma and its effect on mental health.”

Restoration for All staff will use information gathered at these events to create a map of community-based mental health resources, Ola said: “We know it is good for people to know the resources that are available. We want to address all the identified gaps.”

Sometimes a shift in attitude about mental illness is driven by the community’s youngest members. On a Sunday afternoon in late February, Restoration for All organized a faith-based community forum and healing ceremony in a ballroom at the Embassy Suites in Brooklyn Center. There, a group of thoughtful girls — African immigrant and refugee teens involved in Restoration for All’s Future Solutions Now (FUSON) after-

school program, which is funded by the Minnesota Youth Program — talked about how their beliefs and understanding about mental health and suicide have changed through their participation in the nonprofit's facilitated conversations series.

Ayomide Salu, a senior Champlain Park High School, said that ideas about mental illness and suicide in the African community are different from attitudes in the United States. She said that she and her peers often have to play an interpreting role for their parents and the other adults in their community when it comes to discussions around mental health.

“As someone from the African community, I can say that mental health is not ignored, but the negative side of mental health is really set aside,” Salu said. “We just tend to stray away from it and not want to talk about it.” She said that in her time with FUSON, she has learned more about the importance of acknowledging mental illness in the community in order to make sure that those who struggle find support: “Since I have been involved with Restoration for All, I’ve gained empowerment and resilience as well as gaining more consciousness around mental health.”

Salu said she tries to talk about mental health whenever the topic is raised. “The other day, I was having the conversation with my hairstylist, and we were talking about someone who [died by] suicide,” Salu said. “She said, ‘Why would you even do that? You have a life that God gave you. Why would you kill yourself?’” Salu said she explained that there are many reasons why a person might think about suicide, and that anyone can struggle with their mental health: “You don’t know what a person is going through. Everyone has stuff that they’re going through, but as Africans we have a way to hide it.”

Heritage Aluko, a sophomore at Visitation School in Mendota Heights, said that learning more about mental health through her connection to Restoration for All and FUSON has changed her perspective. She tries to share that with as many people as she can.

“When I lived in Nigeria, the idea of mental health did not exist at all,” Aluko said. But since she and her family came to the United States, her attitude has changed: “I think talking about mental health is so important because it shapes the world we live in. It’s important that we understand that and support each other when we struggle,” she said.



## **Andy Steiner**

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