

# Statewide Suicide Prevention Council

2021 ANNUAL REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE



Statewide Suicide Prevention Council  
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March 2022

## Introduction

The State of Alaska's Statewide Suicide Prevention Council (SSPC) was established by the Alaska State Legislature in 2001 (AS 44.29.350) and serves as an advisory council to the Legislature and Governor regarding suicide awareness and prevention.

The duties of the Council are to:

- Improve health and wellness throughout the State by reducing suicide and its effect on individuals, families, and communities.
- Broaden the public's awareness of suicide and the risk factors related to suicide.
- Enhance suicide prevention services and programs throughout the state.
- Develop healthy communities through comprehensive, collaborative, community-based, and faith-based approaches.
- Develop and implement a statewide suicide prevention plan.
- Strengthen existing and build new partnerships between public and private entities that will advance suicide prevention efforts in the State.

The Council is located within the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) and includes 17 council members, of which 13 are voting members. There are 2 non-voting members representing the Alaska State House of Representatives and 2 representing the Alaska State Senate. The Governor appoints the 13 voting members from designated stakeholder groups.

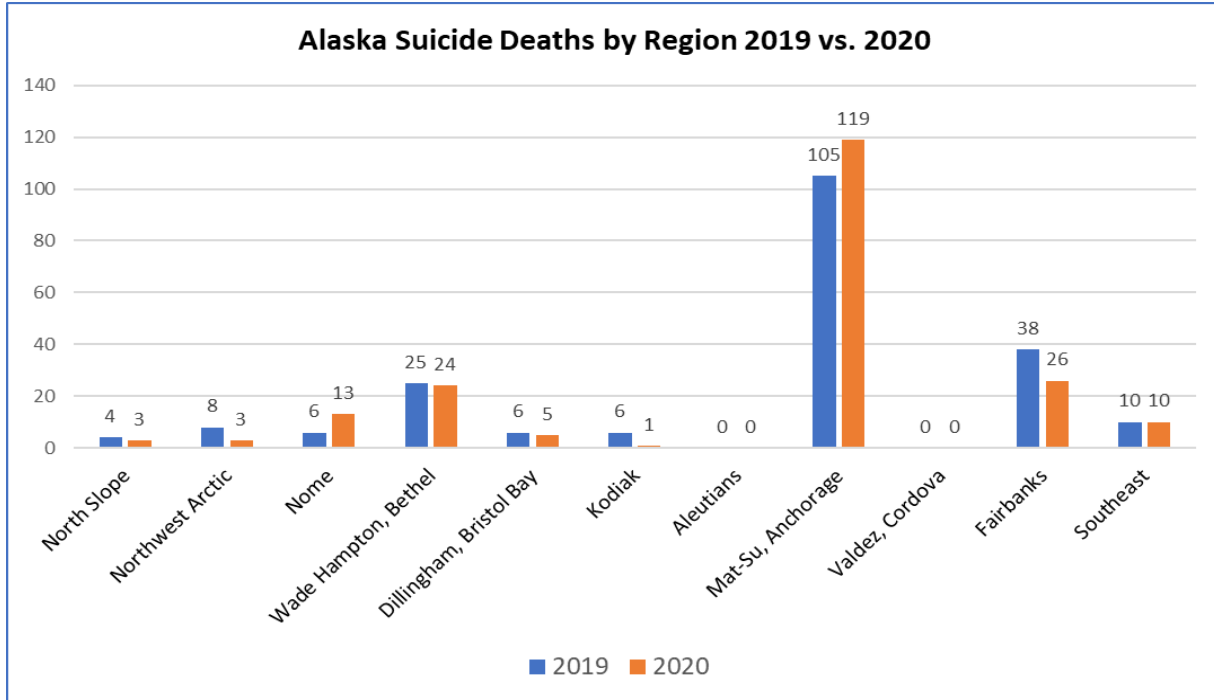
Current Council members include:

- Barbara Franks, Chairperson, Survivor —Fairbanks
- Monique Andrews, Vice-Chair, Military —Eagle River
- Sharon Fishel, Secretary/Treasurer, Education and Early Development —Juneau
- Brenda Moore, Officer-at-Large, Alaska Mental Health Board —Anchorage
- Roberta Moto, Rural member off the road system —Deering
- Diane Fielden, Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse —Soldotna
- Terese Kashi, Secondary schools —Soldotna
- Albert Wall, DHSS —Anchorage
- Kevin Chen, Youth Member —Anchorage
- Cynthia Erickson, Public —Tanana
- Marcus Sanders, Clergy —Anchorage
- Senator Gary Stevens —Kodiak
- Senator Tom Begich —Anchorage
- Representative Sara Hannan —Juneau
- Representative David Nelson —Anchorage
- VACANT, Alaska Federation of Natives
- VACANT, Statewide youth organization

The Council is collocated with the Advisory Board on Alcohol and Drug Abuse and the Alaska Mental Health Board, which collectively share an Executive Director. The Council also has one fulltime staff and are located in Juneau.

## Suicide in Alaska

Suicide is a serious public health issue in Alaska that affects all Alaskans, regardless of age, culture, race, region, or socio-economic background. While suicide rates continue to rise across the United States, Alaska has one of the highest of any state, at more than double the national average. Alaska Health Analytics and Vital Records releases the official number of suicide deaths in Alaska each fall for the previous year. The 2020 figures were released in September of 2021.



While the number of deaths by suicide in Alaska slightly decreased in 2020, it was still the second highest number of suicide deaths in Alaska of any year on record.

- There were 204 Alaskans that died by suicide in 2020, which is a rate of 27.9 per 100,000 people. Alaska continues to have a higher suicide rate than the 2020 national average of 13.48 suicides per 100,000 individuals.
- In 2019 there were 209 Alaskans that died by suicide, a rate of 28.7 per 100,000 people, the highest total number of suicide deaths in Alaska on record.
- Young adults in Alaska ages 20-24 continue to be the most at-risk population to die by suicide, with a rate of 75.6 per 100,000 people in 2020, up from a rate of 58.3 per 100,000.
- The Nome region continues to have the highest rate of suicide compared to all the other regions, at 73.1 per 100,000 between 2011 and 2020. The next two highest regions were Wade Hampton and Bethel region and the Norwest Arctic Borough, with 66.8 and 61.9 per 100,000 respectively. The Anchorage Bowl area continues to have the most total deaths by suicide in all of Alaska, with 1,008 of 1,842 total deaths by suicide between 2011 and 2020.
- Males continue to see the highest total number of deaths by suicide in Alaska, with 165 of the 204 suicide deaths in 2020 being by males, and 39 by females.

- Firearms continue to be the main method of intentional self-harm in Alaska, with 133 of the 204 suicide deaths in 2020 involving a firearm. Suffocation amounted to 50 suicide deaths in 2020, followed by 13 from poisoning, and 8 listed as “other.”

### **Statewide Suicide Prevention Council Activities**

Most of the Council’s activities involve collaboration between stakeholders, supporting various outreach and educational programs, and providing technical assistance as needed. While there are other governmental and private sector agencies with a common goal in the prevention of suicide, no other organization performs the statewide coordinator function.

### **Quarterly Council Meetings**

The Council usually meets on a quarterly basis, generally conducting two in-person meetings in various urban and rural communities throughout Alaska, and two video/teleconference meetings. However, due to the Covid 19 pandemic that began in 2020 and continued throughout 2021, the Council met exclusively via Zoom videoconference to abide by health and safety protocols. The Council held its business meetings via Zoom videoconferencing in February, May, August, and November of 2021. Along with conducting its regular business to meet its statutory obligations, the Council regularly invites suicide prevention partners from across the state to collaborate and present at the quarterly meetings, including community coalitions, tribal organizations, nonprofits, government agencies, and more.

### **Alaska Statewide Suicide Prevention Plan**

Chairperson Barb Franks created a State Plan Subcommittee at the August quarterly meeting to begin the process of developing a new five-year Alaska Suicide Prevention State Plan that is scheduled to be released in March 2023. The Council is statutorily obligated to develop and implement a state suicide prevention plan. The subcommittee includes Council members and staff, as well as a variety of stakeholders from across the state.

The subcommittee meets monthly and is working in three phases: planning, public engagement, and outreach. The subcommittee will engage Alaskans on how the State of Alaska can move forward on statewide prevention efforts and initiatives and will work to build community connections and conversations about suicide prevention in the state.

### **Community Outreach**

Part of the regular work of the Council is to provide public outreach to Alaskans, including public service campaigns to reduce stigma and promote wellness and suicide prevention in Alaska. In 2021, the Council worked with Telemundo Alaska to create a Spanish language television commercial campaign highlighting the Careline phone number, Alaska’s suicide prevention lifeline and someone-to-talk-to number. The campaign ran for 16 weeks beginning in May and is the first time the Council has created a Spanish-language PSA campaign.

### **Suicide Prevention Month-September 2021**

The Council observes Suicide Prevention Month during September each year. Governor Dunleavy issued a proclamation in that recognized Suicide Prevention Week in Alaska as September 5-11.

After the success of an online suicide prevention training in 2020, the Council partnered with the Alaska Native Collaborative Hub for Research on Resilience (ANCHRR) in 2021 to provide a virtual training on International Suicide Prevention Day (Sept. 10). The one-hour training, titled “Working with Community Members to Reduce Risk and Create More Protective Environments for Alaska Native Young People,” taught culturally-responsive, asset-based, and community-oriented strategies to prevent youth suicide by bolstering local and family strengths while reducing risk.

Council staff hosted an informational booth at the Out of Darkness Walk on Sept. 11 in Anchorage sponsored by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention – Alaska Chapter. Thousands of participants attended and the Council distributed hundreds of suicide prevention brochures, magnets, pens, bracelets, and other Careline materials. It was the only in-person suicide prevention event attended by Council staff in 2021.

The Council and DEED also sponsored the annual Wall of Hope campaign with districts across Alaska. However, to last year with most students doing virtual studies, the focus was on “Messages of Hope” to bring the campaign online. The Council also partnered with other community coalitions and organizations throughout September to support their efforts for suicide prevention month across Alaska.

### **Suicide Awareness, Prevention & Postvention Grant Program**

The Council has had a longtime partnership with the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) to administer the Suicide Awareness, Prevention, & Postvention program (SAPP). Along with other school-based suicide prevention activities including educator trainings and crisis response, the SAPP program distributes grants to school districts to promote suicide prevention and awareness in their communities.

Current grantees include the Anchorage School District, Mat-Su School District, Juneau School District, Petersburg School District, North Slope School District, Bering Strait School District, Fairbanks School District, Lower Yukon School District and the Kenai School District. SAPP grant funds are distributed equally (50/50) to both rural and urban school districts.

Along with some funding going toward technical assistance, the SAPP program also funds the development of DEED’s eLearning courses related to suicide awareness, prevention, and postvention. These courses comply with the State of Alaska’s statutory requirements to provide free suicide prevention trainings to all certified educators in Alaska. The SAPP program also pays for 500 seats open to the public to take these courses each year.

During the 2020/2021 school year, the four eLearning courses related to suicide have been completed more than 6,000 times, nearly 2,000 more than the previous year including:

- Suicide Awareness Part A: 3,098 participants
- Suicide Prevention Part B: 1,751 participants
- Suicide Intervention Part C: 839 participants
- Suicide Postvention Part D: 582 participants

The four courses collectively have been taken more than 37,000 times since they were created.

## **Alaska Careline and 9-8-8 Implementation**

The United States Congress passed a bill in 2020 to create a new three-digit suicide prevention hotline 9-8-8, which will launch officially in July 2022. The Division of Behavioral Health received a planning grant in 2021 and created several planning and implementation teams to ensure a smooth transition to the new crisis number that Council members and staff have joined. The planning teams are addressing key coordination, capacity, funding, and communications strategies that are foundational to the launching of 9-8-8 in Alaska.

The Alaska Careline is the only crisis call center in Alaska that is accredited by the American Association of Suicidology, and a member of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. The Alaska Careline currently answers calls from people who directly dial the Careline (1-877-266-HELP) and the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline calls through the nationally designated number 1-877-273-TALK, which will transition to 988 in July 2022. Careline, based in Fairbanks and staffed 24/7 by trained Alaskans, is not strictly for people experiencing suicidal ideation but is also a line for people going through any crisis that need someone to talk to. If all the Careline staff are busy during a new call, callers are automatically transferred to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

While the call volume to Careline slowed a bit in 2021, it has more than tripled in calls over the past decade. In 2012, when call volume was first recorded, 6,956 people called the Careline. Careline received 22,688 calls in 2020, more calls than any other year on record, and went down to 19,993 calls in 2021.

## **Collaborative Statewide Efforts**

Statewide Suicide Prevention Council staff and members are now engaged in several new statewide prevention efforts led by the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC), the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), the Alaska Division of Behavioral Health (DBH), the Alaska Division of Public Health (DPH) and the Alaska Mental Health Trust.

- The Alaska Statewide Violence and Injury Prevention Partnership (ASVIPP) added suicide prevention as a focus area in their public health surveillance and planning work. Staff of the SSPC participate in this DPH workgroup to use data and health analytics to identify key programs and services for suicide prevention.
- As part of the work of ASVIPP, ANTHC and DBH staff began hosting the Suicide Prevention Community of Practice (CoP) in 2021. The goals of this statewide and collaborative work are to connect and build community amongst practitioners working to prevent suicide in Alaska, to learn about meaningful trends and insights from qualitative research and to learn about innovative prevention efforts.
- Zero Suicide is a comprehensive approach for the healthcare system to respond to suicide risk. It is an evidence-based framework that includes universal screening, comprehensive risk assessments, suicide specific treatment, and coordinated care transitions. The Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority partnered with DBH to implement the Zero Suicide framework in Alaska in 2021. Council staff serve on the statewide steering committee and the Community of Practice for this statewide system change initiative.
- The Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority and the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) are working together to implement improvements to Alaska's system of care that

responds to individuals experiencing a behavioral health crisis using the nationally recognized Crisis Now model as a framework. The Crisis Now model is a continuum of three components that are working in many communities to prevent suicide, reduce the inappropriate use of emergency rooms and correctional settings, and to provide the best supports for individuals in crisis. Council staff and council members participate in the ongoing stakeholder and planning work for this statewide system change initiative.

## **Conclusion**

The Statewide Suicide Prevention Council will continue to work with local suicide prevention groups, suicide survivors, partners, and other stakeholders to implement the goals and strategies during the final year of the current 5-year state suicide prevention plan. Both upstream and primary prevention efforts are needed to reduce suicide in Alaska, with a strong focus on young adults and other populations of concern. Strong state leadership, dedicated program efforts, collaboration and long-term sustainable resources are needed to address suicide in Alaska and the 'web of causality' that impacts the health and well-being of Alaskans.