

**Heidi Hedberg**  
Commissioner

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**Department of Health**

Anchorage, Alaska

**STATE OF ALASKA**

**PRESS RELEASE**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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EDITORS: PLEASE ARRANGE ATTENDANCE AND/OR PHOTO NEEDS IN ADVANCE.

**Behavioral Health Division and Statewide Suicide Prevention Council bring 'Messages of Hope' Suicide Prevention Conference to Anchorage**

**May 15, 2023 / ANCHORAGE** — Alaska's Division of Behavioral Health Suicide Prevention Team and the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council co-host the 2023 Suicide Prevention Conference "Messages of Hope" in Anchorage this week (Wednesday, May 17 - Thursday, May 18, at the Egan Center).

This conference is an opportunity to engage with suicide prevention research, data, innovation and community-level action to address suicide within Alaska, as well as to highlight the five-year State Suicide Prevention Plan, the power of youth voices and Alaskan-centered knowledge. Session topics highlight goals outlined in the recently released prevention plan and include: Healthy Native Youth, Military Culture and Suicide, Creativity in Crisis and Reporting on Suicide (by the media).

This is the first year the conference is being held in person since the COVID-19 pandemic and the first time the two entities are co-hosting, said Leah Van Kirk, the Statewide Suicide Prevention Coordinator and Acting Executive Director of the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council. "We're excited to finally be able to connect in person, as we share information that is so critical to saving Alaskan lives," said Van Kirk. Conference events will include a video celebration of youth artists who contributed to the 988 Create Art Contest earlier this year (as well as live music and art on display), and an ice cream social, where Department of Health speaker Eric Morrison will present a review of Alaska's five-year suicide prevention plan.

Among the keynote speakers is Keita Franklin, LCSW, Ph.D., the Co-Director of the Columbia Lighthouse Project and the former principal advisor on suicide to the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Presenters from the Department of Health include:

- Eric Morrison, Statewide Suicide Prevention Council Lead;
- Melissa Bradley, Alaska Division of Public Health Epidemiology Specialist on the Maternal and Child Death Review (under the Section of Women's Children's and Family Health);

- Andrea Fenaughty, Senior Chronic Disease Epidemiologist with the state’s Section of Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, within the Division of Public Health;
- Steven Riley Fitting, Epidemiologist, whose work focuses on tracking adverse childhood experiences in Alaska using survey and database information;
- Anna Frick, Epidemiologist and manager of the state’s [Syndromic Surveillance](#) program, a way to keep in touch with the health of the community in real time;
- Charity Lee, Zero Suicide Program Coordinator in the Division of Behavioral Health.
- Leah Van Kirk, the Statewide Suicide Prevention Coordinator and Acting Executive Director of the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council is also presenting.

Read the state’s plan: Messages of Hope Promoting Wellness to Prevent Suicide in Alaska, 2023-2027  
Statewide Suicide Prevention Plan

Conference website: <https://aksuicidepreventionconference.com/>

[988 Create \(Art contest winners\)](#)

*Alaska’s [Division of Behavioral Health](#), a division of the Alaska Department of Health, oversees the delivery of mental health and substance misuse services in the state. The division provides a continuum of behavioral health services for Alaskans throughout the state. It also houses the state’s [Suicide Prevention Program](#), which offers grants, resources and training for individuals and communities.*

*The [Statewide Suicide Prevention Council](#) is an advisory council to the Legislature and Governor on suicide awareness and prevention established in 2001 by the Alaska State Legislature. The Council works to reduce suicide and its impacts in Alaska’s communities, leads development of the statewide suicide prevention plan and provides annual reports to the Governor and Alaska State Legislature. Leah Van Kirk is Acting Executive Director of the Council.*

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