

Statewide Suicide Prevention Council

Annual Report to the Legislature
February 2021



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Statewide Suicide Prevention Council Annual Legislative Report 2021

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 17-member Council is located within the Department of Health and Social Services and consists of 13 voting members with 2 non-voting members representing the Alaska State House of Representatives and 2 non-voting members representing the Alaska State Senate. The Governor appoints the 13 voting members from designated stakeholder groups.

2020 Council Members

Barbara Franks, Survivor Seat—Fairbanks
Monique Andrews, Military Seat—Eagle River
Sarah Chen, Youth Member—Anchorage
Cynthia Erickson, Public Seat —Tanana
Diane Fielden, Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse — Soldotna
Sharon Fishel, Department of Education and Early Development — Juneau
Terese Kashi, Secondary School Seat —Soldotna
William Martin, Alaska Federation of Natives— Juneau
Brenda Moore-Beyers, Alaska Mental Health Board —Anchorage
Roberta Moto, Rural Seat —Deering
Marcus Sanders, Clergy Seat —Anchorage
Albert Wall, Department of Health and Social Services —Juneau
Irish Wolfe, Statewide Youth Organization Seat —Eagle River
Senator Peter Micciche —Soldotna
Senator Tom Begich —Anchorage
Representative Sara Hannan —Juneau
Representative Sharon Jackson— Eagle River



Anchorage Daily News Advertisement for
Suicide Prevention Week- February 2020

Suicide in Alaska– What the Data Shows

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 suicide rates 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 and the 2019 figures were released in September of 2020.

Unfortunately, in 2019 Alaska had the highest number of deaths by suicide on record for a single year. There were 209 Alaskans who died by suicide in 2019, at a rate of 28.7 per 100,000 people. The previous high number was 201 deaths by suicide in 2015, with a rate of 27.3 per 100,000.



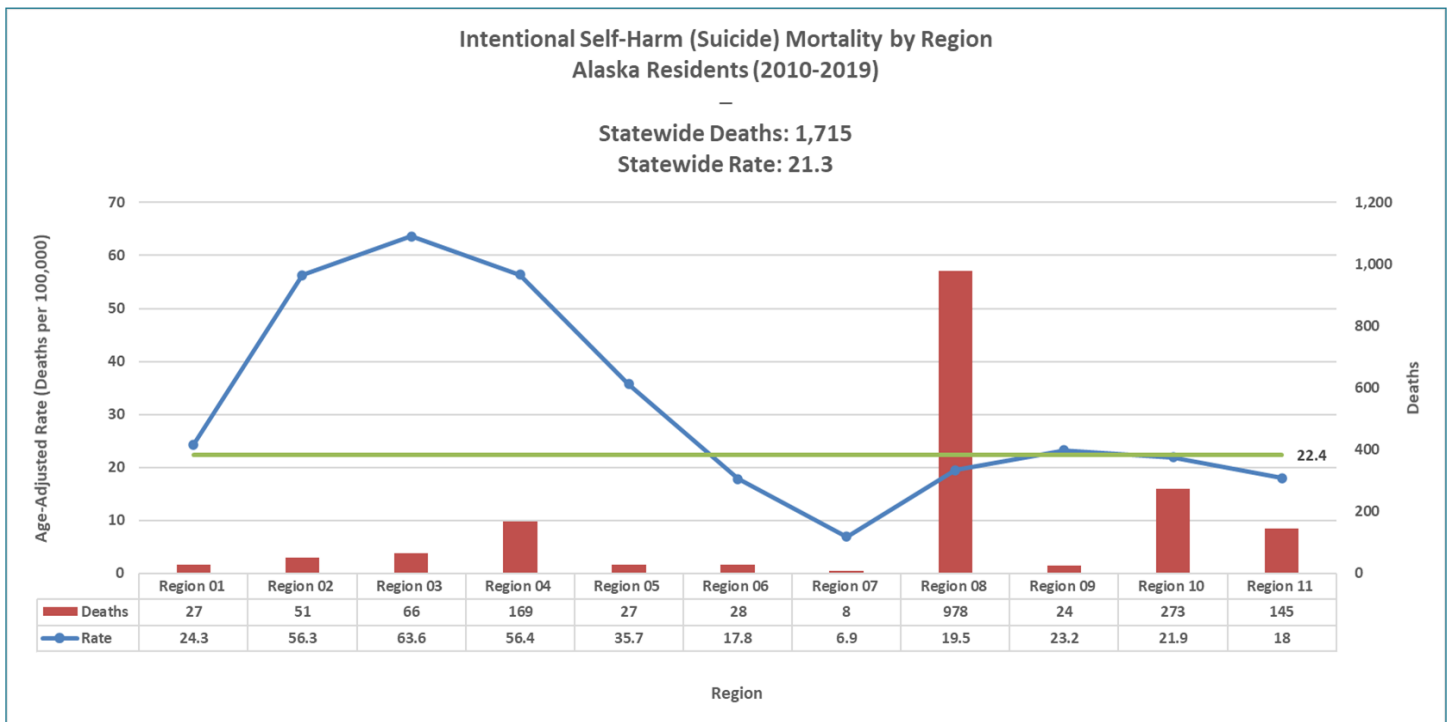
Sources: Centers for Disease Control (CDC)- National Center for Health Statistics
Alaska Division of Public Health- Alaska Health Analytics and Vital Records Section.
Updated September 2020

Some additional points to note from these graphs include:

- Alaskan youth ages 20-24 continue to be the most at-risk population to die by suicide, with a rate of 49.9 per 100,000 people between 2010 and 2019.
- American Indians and Alaska Natives have the highest rate of suicide in Alaska, and there was a very significant increase in 2019 compared to previous years. In 2019, the rate of American Indians and Alaska Natives who died by suicide was 67.2 per 100,000, compared to 41.9 per 100,000 the previous year. The non-Native rate in 2019 was 19.6 per 100,000.
- The Nome region continues to have the highest **rate** of suicide compared to other regions, at 63.6 per 100,000 between 2010 and 2019. The next two highest regions were Wade Hampton and Bethel region and the Northwest Arctic Borough, with 56.4 and 56.3 per 100,000 respectively.
- The Anchorage, Matanuska-Susitna Borough and Kenai Peninsula Borough area continues to have the most **total deaths** by suicide in all of Alaska, with 978 of the 1,800 total deaths by suicide between 2010 and 2019.

Suicide in Alaska– What the Data Shows (Cont.)

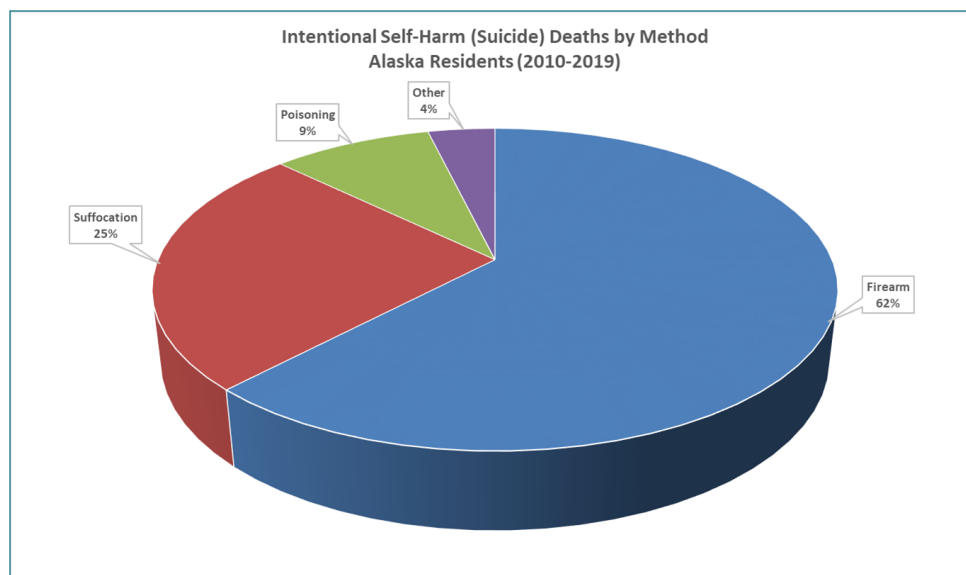
- Males continue to see the highest total number of deaths by suicide in Alaska, accounting for 79% of all suicides between 2010 and 2019, compared to 21% by females, with a rate of 34.6 and 9.4 per 100,000 respectively.
- Firearms continue to be the main method of intentional self-harm, with 62% of suicide deaths between 2010 and 2019 involving a firearm. Suffocation amounted to 25% in that time frame, followed by 9% poisoning, and 4% listed as “other.”



Region 1: North Slope Borough
 Region 2: Northwest Arctic Borough
 Region 3: Nome
 Region 4: Wade Hampton, Bethel

Region 5: Dillingham, Bristol Bay Borough
 Region 6: Kodiak Island Borough
 Region 7: Aleutians
 Region 8: Mat-Su, Anchorage, Kenai Peninsula

Region 9: Valdez-Cordova
 Region 10: Yukon-Koyukuk, Fairbanks, Denali
 Region 11: Southeast



Source: Alaska Division of Public Health- Alaska Health Analytics and Vital Records Section.

Updated September 2020

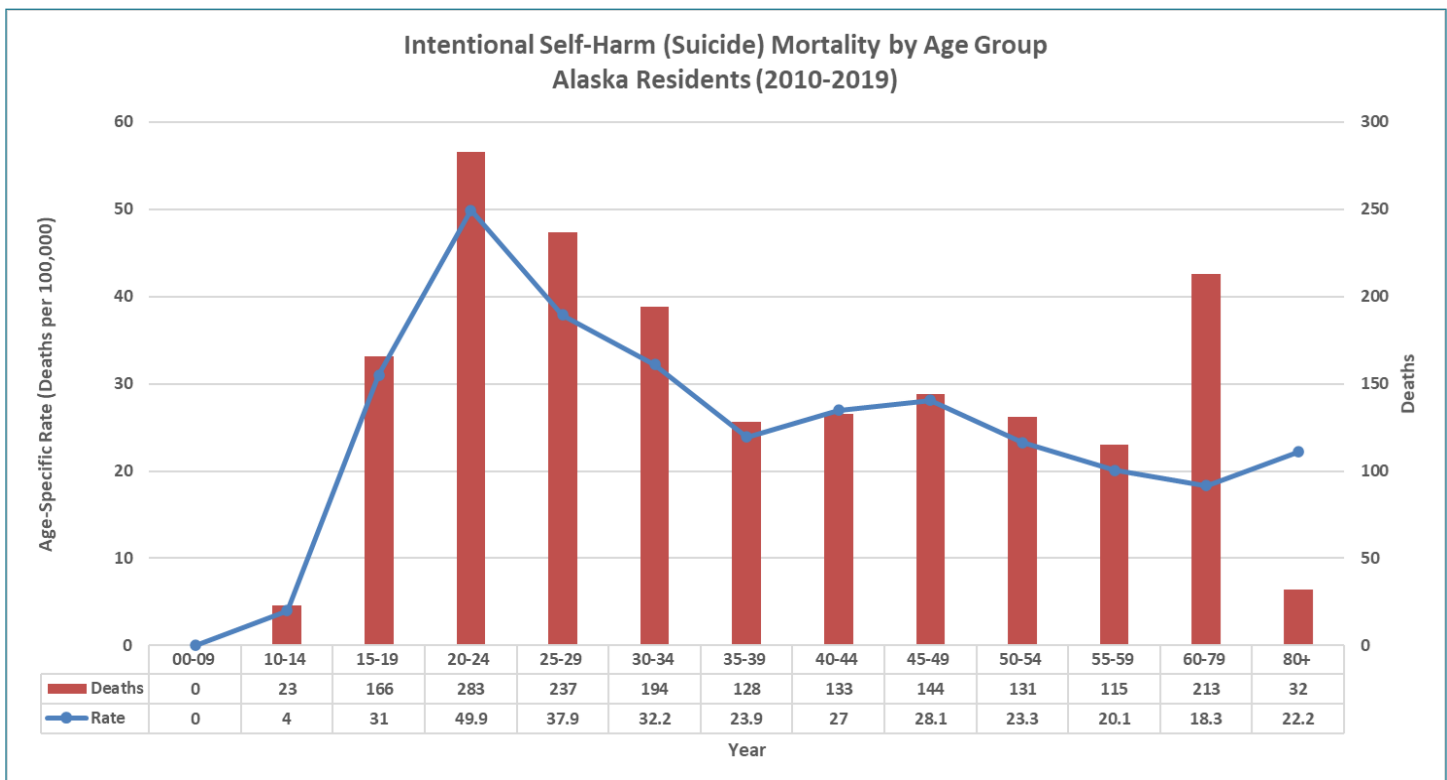
Suicide in Alaska– What the Data Shows (Cont.)

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a report in September of 2020 that highlighted the dramatic increase of youth suicide over the past 10 years. Nationally, the suicide rate among persons 10-24 was statistically stable from 2000 to 2007, and then increased 57.4%, from 6.8 per 100,000 in 2007 to 10.7 in 2018.

Between 2016-2018, the suicide rate among persons aged 10-24 was highest in Alaska at 31.8 suicide deaths per 100,000 compared to 24.2 deaths per 100,000 in 2007-2009. New Jersey had the lowest suicide rate among that age group of all 50 states at 5.7 suicide deaths per 100,000. Recent research by the CDC has documented increases from 2005 to 2017 in serious psychological distress, major depression, and suicidal thoughts and attempts among adolescents and young adults.

Alaska Health Analytics and Vital Records will release the official 2020 suicide death figures in the fall of 2021. While it is too soon to discuss those figures, Alaska Health Analytics and Vital Records has indicated that preliminary information shows 2020 will likely be similar to the 2019 figures.

While official suicide data for 2020 won't be available until the fall of 2021, the State of Alaska Epidemiology released a bulletin in December entitled, "Indicators of Self-Harm and Unintentional Drug Overdose during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Alaska" (http://www.epi.alaska.gov/bulletins/docs/b2020_15.pdf) highlighting the preliminary figures for the first three quarters of the calendar year which stated that the rates were consistent with the prior two years. However, emergency department visits in 2020 for suicidal ideation and suicide attempts increased by 3% and 12% respectively compared to 2019. According to the report this is consistent with a national trend of rising rates of mental health and substance use disorders due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Source: Alaska Division of Public Health- Alaska Health Analytics and Vital Records Section.
Updated September 2020

Suicide Prevention Council Activities 2020

Most of the Council's activities involve collaboration between stakeholders, supporting various outreach and educational programs, and providing technical assistance as needed.

Quarterly Council Meetings

The Council meets on a quarterly basis, generally conducting two in-person meetings which alternate between urban and rural communities, and two video/teleconference meetings per year. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and mandatory travel restrictions and group gathering mandates, the Council only held one in-person meeting in Juneau in February 2020. The Council held its other two business meetings via Zoom videoconferencing, in June and October 2020.

Highlights of the Juneau meeting included inviting the Federal Communication Commission to provide an update on the future three-digit suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotline system, which was later approved by the U.S. Congress in September 2020.

The Council also invited students and the principal of Yaakoosge Daakahidi High School to highlight its suicide prevention program that is funded by the SSPC and Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) Suicide Awareness, Prevention, and Postvention (SAPP) grant program (discussed in further detail at the end of this report).



SSPC Members, Staff and Partners in Juneau
February 2020

The Council also heard reports from other partner organizations and agencies, including the Division of Behavioral Health, the Alaska Mental Health Board, the Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, DEED, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention Alaska Chapter, Valley Awareness and Prevention for Suicide (VAPS) community coalition from Wasilla, and the Juneau Suicide Prevention Coalition.

The meeting also included two site visits, one to Bartlett Regional Hospital to discuss the construction of its Crisis Stabilization Unit, and another to tour Juneau's Housing First, Forget-Me-Not Manor, a supportive housing program for chronically homeless residents with severe substance use disorders. Council member Rep. Sara Hannan also hosted a reception at the State Capitol for legislators, Council members, and members of the Juneau Suicide Prevention Coalition.

Community Outreach on Covid-19 Impacts

Due to increased stress and uncertainty brought upon individuals by the pandemic beginning in March of 2020, the Council partnered with the Alaska Mental Health Board, the Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, and the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority on a series of radio commercials that ran across the state from late March through April. Messaging encouraged Alaskans to seek help when they are in crisis, and advertised the Alaska Careline suicide prevention lifeline and statewide crisis number.

Community Outreach on Covid-19 Impacts (Cont.)

Council staff also responded to numerous requests for resources and mailed out hundreds of brochures, cards, and magnets with the Careline crisis line number and other suicide prevention information to individuals, community coalitions, nonprofits, and other organizations.

The Council launched a media campaign with digital advertising on the Anchorage Daily News (ADN) website running throughout the month of September, as well as some print ads in the ADN for Suicide Prevention Week. That included a full-page print ad on Suicide Prevention Day, Thursday, September 10, sponsored by the Council, the Trust, the Alaska Mental Health Board, and the Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse. There were also three separate Careline radio commercials running on a variety of stations across Alaska that ran through September sponsored by the Council and the Trust.

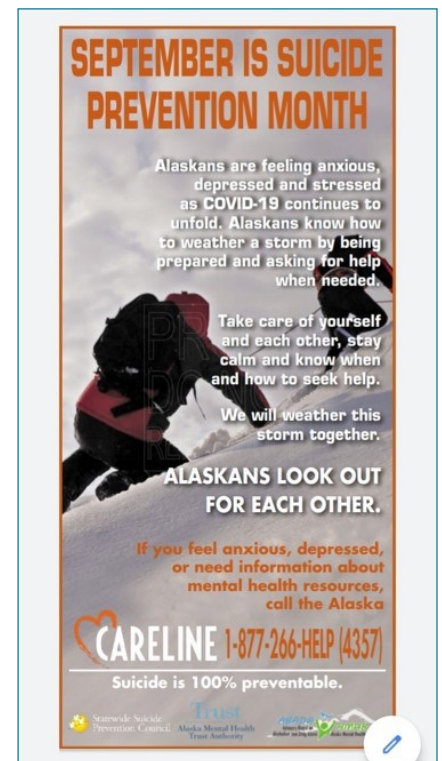
Council Chair Barb Franks and the chairs of Alaska Mental Health Board, and the Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse submitted a collaborative commentary to the ADN titled, “Alaskans look out for each other” discussing Suicide Prevention Month during the time of COVID-19. It was published on Thursday, September 3 and can be read online here: <https://www.adn.com/opinions/2020/09/02/alaskans-look-out-for-each-other/>.

Suicide Awareness, Prevention & Postvention School-Based Program (SAPP)

The Council has had a longtime partnership with the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) to administer the Suicide Awareness, Prevention, & Postvention (SAPP) program. 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. Many of the grantees include peer-to-peer awareness and intervention models that have shown to be highly effective in youth suicide prevention efforts.

Current grantees include the Anchorage School District, Matanuska Susitna Borough School District, Juneau School District, Petersburg School District, North Slope Borough School District, Bering Strait School District, Fairbanks North Star Borough School District, and the Kenai Peninsula Borough 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 fall of 2020, the four eLearning courses related to suicide have been completed more than 4,000 times.



COVID-19 Statewide Careline Promotion,
March 2020

Suicide Prevention Month - September 2020

In August 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that Americans were experiencing symptoms of anxiety three times higher than the same time-period in 2019. The same report stated prevalence of depressive disorder was four times higher than it was in the same period of 2019. Due to the reported increase in anxiety and/or depression the Council decided to primarily focus its Suicide Prevention Month activities on community outreach.

Governor Dunleavy issued two proclamations in September related to suicide prevention; one proclaiming September as Suicide Prevention Month that focused mainly on national strategies, and the other for Suicide Prevention Week (September 6-12) that focused primarily on Alaska issues.

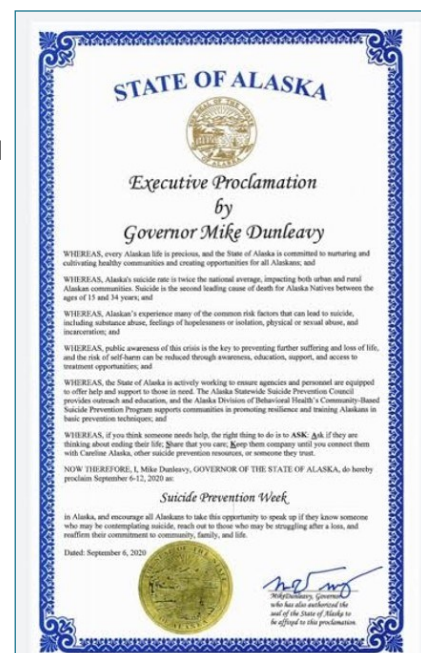
Due to limitations of in-person gatherings, the number of suicide prevention trainings in Alaska were greatly reduced in 2020. On International Suicide Prevention Day, September 10, the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority provided a one-hour virtual QPR/Gatekeeper suicide prevention training co-sponsored by the Council and the Juneau Suicide Prevention Coalition. The Alaska Gatekeeper Training uses the QPR method as its core training, which stands for Question, Persuade and Refer, an emergency mental health intervention for suicidal persons. QPR is a simple educational program that teaches ordinary citizens how to recognize a mental health emergency and how to get a person at-risk the help they need. It is also an action plan that can result in lives saved. The training was recorded and is available for public use on the Council's main webpage and its YouTube channel.

The Council also partnered with the Associated General Contractors of Alaska, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention Alaska Chapter, and the risk management firm CSDZ for a virtual suicide prevention training geared toward the construction and trades industries on September 16.

The Council and DEED sponsored the annual Wall of Hope campaign with districts across Alaska. However, this year was different with most students doing virtual studies, so the focus was on "Messages of Hope" to bring the campaign online. Some of the Wall of Hope messaging is on the front cover of this report and many thanks to DEED for sharing this image with the Council.

The Alaska Careline

The Council continues to partner with the Alaska Division of Behavioral Health on several suicide prevention initiatives and to support the efforts of the statewide toll-free Careline Crisis Intervention line. Careline is a crisis line based in Fairbanks that is staffed 24-hours a day, seven days a week, by trained Alaskans. It is not strictly for people experiencing suicidal ideation but is also a line for people going through any crisis who need someone to talk to. If all the Careline workers are busy on the phone at 1-877-266-4357, then they are automatically transferred to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.



Governor Dunleavy's Proclamation
September 2020

Alaska Careline (Cont.)

The call volume to Careline continues to grow, more than tripling in calls over the past 9 years. In 2012, when call volume was first recorded, 6,956 people called the Careline. In 2020, Careline received 22,688 calls, more calls than any other year on record. The last two quarters of the year saw more calls than any other quarter on record, with 6,612 calls between July and September, and 6,039 calls between October and December. The main reasons people identified for contacting the Careline were loneliness, mental illness, anxiety, relationships, depression, and crisis. Less than 11% of callers disclosed thoughts of suicide, and less than 1% of callers included disclosure of suicidal thoughts that resulted in a 911 dispatch.

Careline intends to become part of the national partnership included in the future 988 suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotline system, which is set to be implemented on July 16, 2022. The State received a planning grant for 988 implementation and Council staff and Careline staff are both included in the planning team that is addressing key coordination, capacity, funding, and communications strategies that are foundational to the launching of 988 in Alaska.

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 in the 5-year state suicide prevention plan. Collaborative partnerships are essential for the Councils' work and we thank our partners at the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Alaska Division of Behavioral Health, Alaska Division of Public Health, Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, and local and regional suicide and wellness coalitions for their work and dedication to Alaskans.

Both upstream and primary prevention efforts are needed to reduce suicide in Alaska, with a strong focus on adolescents and young adults, and American Indian and Alaska Natives. Continued 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.



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