

Attacking Montana's high rate of suicide

- Claire R. Oakley For The Gazette



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Worldwide, the American Association of Suicidology estimates there is one suicide every 40 seconds. Montana has the unfortunate distinction of the highest suicide rate in the nation, almost double the average — 23.9 per 100,000 people as compared to the average of 12.9. States in the Rocky Mountain region south of Montana and Alaska also have much higher rates of suicide than the West Coast and East Coast.

Causes leading to suicide vary with the individual, but there are some common themes. States with high suicide rates tend to have limited access to mental health services and use of those services is more stigmatized. In Montana, 63 percent of suicides are completed with firearms. The combination of alcohol use and easier access to unlocked firearms is a factor.

So what are we doing to counter this preventable loss of life? Clearly, not enough.

However, many people across the state recognize suicide as a community scourge and are working to prevent further deaths. RiverStone Health partners with the Suicide Prevention Coalition of Yellowstone Valley, local school districts and medical education programs to try to make an impact. Both the Montana Family Medicine Residency at RiverStone Health and the Rocky Mountain College Physician Assistant programs are training primary care providers to be more aware and proactive in recognizing mental illness and the risk of suicide. Since many of the new physicians and mid-level

providers will stay in Montana and the surrounding states, we will increase the number of health care providers who have learned more about how to address mental and emotional health needs.

The Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services provides free Signs of Suicide (SOS) training to schools and has distributed it to 160 schools across Montana. SOS aims at middle and high school students and includes depression screening. The SOS curriculum helps make students more aware of their own mental health and that of peers. It also teaches the ACT acronym: Acknowledge, Care, Tell. The “tell” portion of the training encourages involving a trusted adult.

In Billings, Shaun Harrington, the president of Billings Catholic Schools, said that adopting the SOS training was an important step for the Catholic schools. “We feel it is important to inform our students and families and to move forward with training,” he said.

Terry Bouck, Superintendent of Billings Public Schools, intends to implement the SOS curriculum soon. In addition, the school district partners with Rimrock Foundation, Juvenile Probation Services and the Yellowstone Youth Crisis Network. The public schools also send counseling staff to suicide prevention training.

For the past 40 years, Montana has had one of the highest rates of suicide among the 50 states. The problem is not an easy one to solve, but there are some things that you can do:

- Unload and lock all firearms when not in use.
- Request a gunlock from RiverStone Health Population Health Services if you cannot afford to buy a good-quality gunlock.
- Sponsor the free, one-hour suicide prevention class, Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) by contacting Population Health Services.
- Take one of the More Than Sad: Teen Depression programs through the Montana Chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. The series has individualized programs geared to parents, teachers or students. To schedule a free program or for more info, contact Montana@afsp.org or call Joan Nye 406-321-0591.
- Support prevention efforts through the “Out of Darkness Community Walk” on Sept. 18 at Veterans Park
- Learn more about the warning signs of suicide from suicidology.org. Those signs include: Having or expressing thoughts of suicide, substance abuse, mood changes or withdrawal from activities, feeling anxiety, purposelessness, trapped, angry, hopeless or reckless.

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