

Suicides, attempts spike again in Western Alaska villages

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As many as nine young people from Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta villages have killed themselves over the past two months, Alaska State Troopers say.

Western Alaska is home to some of the highest suicide rates in the state, but the pace of more than one death per week has some village leaders on alert.

"There's something different going on this year. Here in Scammon Bay we've had three suicides. Maybe two or three attempts," said Brandon Aguchak, executive director for the tribal council.

The council is offering a free drum of gasoline -- fuel is \$5.89 a gallon at the local gas station -- as a door prize this afternoon at a meeting inviting people to talk about the mix of drugs, alcohol and suicide in a village one mile from the Bering Sea.

Beginning when a 17-year-old was found hanging in front of the town school last July, the Yup'ik community of just 530 people has lost four young men in a year. Two killed themselves in June.

All but one of the dead since late May have been 17- to 22-year-old men; the ninth was a 15-year-old girl. Alcohol played a part in some but not all of the deaths, according to trooper reports.

"Parents need to know what they can say to their children, how they can raise them to avoid issues like that so kids always learn how to value life ... How valuable life is and how heartbreaking it is to have parents go through what some kids might do," said Harley Sundown, assistant principal at the Scammon Bay school.

His 20-year-old son killed himself June 9.

"He wasn't depressed at all. It's just something that he put in his mind when he was drinking one night in Bethel," Sundown said. "It's just something he did at the spur of the moment, and that's one of the things we do in our culture: We always say you don't do something on the first impulse."

Among the other apparent suicides described in trooper reports or interviews this week:

- May 23, Newtok: 17-year-old male.
- May 23, Akiak: 17-year-old male.
- May 30, St. Marys: 22-year-old male.
- June 15, Hooper Bay: 15-year-old female.
- July 1, Scammon Bay: 17-year-old male.
- July 5, Chevak: 21-year-old male.
- July 9, Mountain Village: 17-year-old male.
- July 10, Emmonak, 21-year-old male.

Seven of the deaths came in the Wade Hampton Census area near the mouth of the Yukon River, one of the poorest places in the country and home to the highest suicide rate in the state between 2004 and 2008, according to the Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics.

James Gallanos, lead suicide prevention coordinator for the state, has said a lack of jobs and opportunities, alcohol abuse, trauma, abuse and mental problems can be contributing factors in suicide for all population groups. Alaska Natives, especially young people, can have the additional burden of feeling loss of culture and identity, Gallanos said after a string of suicides in Kotzebue-area communities in 2008.

More Alaskans killed themselves that year than any year on record, according the Bureau of Vital Statistics. The state hasn't released numbers for 2009 yet.

Meanwhile, the Bethel-based Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corp. is sending a team trained in crisis response to Scammon Bay at the village's request, said Janice Hamrick, director of behavioral health village and clinic services. "I'm expecting some pretty powerful things to come out of Scammon Bay, because they're ready for it."

There are signs that old taboos against talking about suicide are lifting in corners of Alaska.

"It's not a hush-hush issue in our community," said Sheila Williams, tribal administrator for Akiak. "We openly talk about it. We've started a family healing and wellness program."

Williams -- who lost an uncle and cousin to suicide -- estimates there have been five suicides in the Yup'ik village of about 350 people in the past six or seven years.

Each death in the small villages lining the state's rivers and coasts can reverberate along a web of family ties. Few households are left untouched.

"In a city, you know, everybody, they're going about their business," said Scammon Bay City Manager Nile Aguchak. "But here in a community like ours, when something like that happens, it affects a little bit of everybody."

Aguchak's father killed himself in the village in the 1970s. His brother committed suicide in 1990, he said.

Read The Village, the ADN's blog about rural Alaska, at adn.com/thevillage. Twitter updates: twitter.com/adnvillage. Call Kyle Hopkins at 257-4334.

Suicide prevention Where to get help • Alaska's Careline is at 877-266-4357. You can also visit carelinealaska.com and chat with counselors online. • The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 800-273-8255. If you are looking for information about suicide, try these websites : • Alaska Suicide Prevention Council -- www.hss.state.ak.us/suicideprevention. • Suicide Prevention Resource Center -- www.sprc.org. • American Association of Suicidology -- www.suicidology.org. • Suicide Prevention Action Network USA -- www.spanusa.org. • Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics: Data about suicide in Alaska -- www.hss.state.ak.us/dph/bvs/data/default.htm. • Alaska Violent Death Reporting System (AK VDRS) -- www.hss.state.ak.us/dph/ipems/AKVDRS/Default.htm. Source: Alaska Division of Behavioral Health Warning signs a person is in acute risk for suicide: • Threatening to hurt or kill oneself or talking about wanting to hurt or kill oneself. • Looking for ways to kill oneself by seeking access to firearms, available pills or other means. • Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide when these actions are out of the ordinary for the person. Additional warning signs: • Feeling hopeless. • Feeling rage or uncontrolled anger or seeking revenge. • Acting recklessly or engaging in risky activities, seemingly without thinking. • Feeling trapped -- like there's no way out. • Increased alcohol or drug use. • Withdrawing from friends, family and society. • Feeling anxious, agitated or unable to sleep, or sleeping all the time. • Experiencing dramatic mood changes. • Seeing no reason for living or having no sense of purpose in life. Source: National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

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