

Alaska State Legislature

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Senator Betty Davis

Sponsor Statement

SB 35 "An Act extending the termination date of the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council; and providing for an effective date."

SB 35 extends the termination date of the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council to June 30, 2013. Suicide is a very serious public health concern in Alaska, particularly among young males and the Alaska native population. Extension of the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council is important in curtailing this avoidable loss of life. The mission of the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council is to advise the governor and the legislature on issues relating to suicide. In collaboration with communities, faith-based organizations, and public-private entities, the Council works to improve the health and wellness of Alaskans by reducing suicide and its effect on individuals and communities.

The Executive Summary of the July, 2005 study by the Alaska Injury Prevention Center funded by Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority "Alaska Suicide Hospitalizations, 2001-2002," reported that in 2002 32,000 people took their own lives in the United States, and 20 times that number sought treatment for self-inflicted injuries. Alaska had the highest age-adjusted suicide rate of all the states in 2002 at 21.12 per 100,000 population, which is nearly twice that of the U.S. rate of 10.99 per 100,000. An average of 125 people die from suicide each year in Alaska, making it the number one cause of death for Alaskans under the age of 50 years (if unintentional injuries are examined individually instead of in groups).

Hospitalizations for suicide per the above study make a compelling case for the prevention of suicide and new insights into this dramatic public health problem. Over \$4 million in hospital costs alone is spent in public funds each year to care for suicide attempts. This did not include physicians' and specialists' costs. While the toll on society and family members by suicide may be incalculable, significant numbers were revealed:

- The average age for the patients was 30 years.
- The average length of each hospital stay was 4 days, with a range of 1 to 366.
- The average cost per case was \$8,986.
- Over 75% of the hospital costs were paid through public funding sources.
- 15% of hospital costs had to be written-off for patients' inability to pay.

The unabated high rate of suicide in Alaska demands continued attention and effort and earnestly urges, if not compels, the extension of the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council. A subsequent study to the above by the Alaska Injury Prevention Center from 9/1/03-8/31/06 found 426 suicides in Alaska during this 36-month period, with the continuing rate of suicide at over 21/100,000. Males outnumbered females 4 to 1. The age-group 20-29 had both the greatest number of suicides and the highest rate per 100,000 population. Alaska Natives had a significantly higher average rate of suicide than the non-Native population (51.4/100,000 compared to 16.9/100,000). The leading cause of death was firearms with toxicology reports in 1/3 of the cases. Alcohol was found in 44% of the toxicology tests and marijuana was found in 15%.