

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON TRIBAL AFFAIRS

April 3, 2025

8:05 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Maxine Dibert, Chair
Representative Ashley Carrick
Representative Robyn Niayuq Burke
Representative Andi Story
Representative Rebecca Schwanke
Representative Jubilee Underwood
Representative Elexie Moore

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: SUICIDE PREVENTION IN ALASKA

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

JAMES BIELA, Advocacy Ambassador; Social Worker
Americans for Suicide Prevention
Alaska Chapter;
Lower Kuskokwim School District
Bethel, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a PowerPoint, titled "Engaging Community Through Sources of Strength."

JOANNE PROEFROCK, Director
Americans for Suicide Prevention
Alaska Chapter
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Spoke on Americans for Suicide Prevention.

ACTION NARRATIVE

8:05:09 AM

CHAIR MAXINE DIBERT called the House Special Committee on Tribal Affairs meeting to order at 8:05 a.m. Representatives Underwood, Carrick, Burke, Story, Schwanke, and Dibert were present at the call to order. Representative Moore arrived as the meeting was in progress.

^PRESENTATION: Suicide Prevention in Alaska

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8:05:57 AM

CHAIR DIBERT announced that the only order of business would be a presentation on suicide prevention in Alaska.

8:06:55 AM

JAMES BIELA, Advocacy Ambassador, Americans for Suicide Prevention (AFSP), Alaska Chapter, Social Worker, Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD), shared that besides volunteering with AFSP, he "wears many hats," and he listed other functions that he fulfills. He shared that after a friend had died by suicide, he cofounded the Alaska Chapter of AFSP. He pointed out that this was after he had obtained a master's degree in social work. He said, "I thought I knew everything about suicide," but he realized that he knew nothing. He stated that he has learned from being a part of AFSP. He shared that he has worked in Toksook Bay and the surrounding remote villages as an itinerant social worker for 21 years. He stated that in 2010 the LKSD school board mandated that high school students take an hour-long course on suicide prevention; however, he expressed the opinion that this program "was not going too well" because it was not culturally relevant. Per this realization, he said that in 2013 he brought in local students and Elders for a one-day hope and healing event to help alter the program so that it would be culturally connected. He discussed the success of the program after it was altered, and now the program is an annual cultural event, lasting for six days.

8:12:16 AM

MR. BIELA stated that an episode in the video series, "Indie Alaska" was filmed in Toksook Bay [in 2023], and for a week the cultural event was filmed. He played the episode, titled "Talk it to the Tundra: How a Yup'ik Village Heals Together" [video

link found at <https://www.pbs.org/video/talk-to-the-tundra-how-a-yupik-village-heals-together-yxrsfo/>].

[8:32:50 AM](#)

MR. BIELA noted that the video had been edited to fit the series, and he addressed some of the elements that had been left out, including talks with the Elders, footage of the memorial feast, and the muskox stomping. He explained the purpose of muskox stomping is to bring laughter and unity. Since the program started, he said there has not been a [youth] suicide in Toksook Bay over the past three years. He stated that he has been working with the Center for Alaska Native Health Research and referenced the Qungasvik Toolbox, which is a multilevel strength-based intervention developed by Yup'ik communities to reduce and prevent alcohol use disorder. He stated that this tool, along with AFSP material "has worked fabulously."

MR. BIELA stated that, with the help of the American Academy of Pediatrics, he has been able to get funding for more activities for the upcoming suicide prevention and cultural program. He noted that one of the new activities would be a story night by the high school students. He stated that in 2017 he had "hounded" AFSP because its video on surviving a suicide was not culturally relevant for the village. He stated that he spent six months with Elders to add Yup'ik and Cup'ik subtitles to the video, which will be playing during the suicide prevention and cultural week.

[8:38:21 AM](#)

JOANNE PROEFROCK, Director, Americans for Suicide Prevention, Alaska Chapter, expressed appreciation to Mr. Biela, pointing out that his work is done on a voluntary basis. He said that she is "beyond words on how much he has done." She stated that her role at AFSP encompasses the entire state, as the national organization is focusing on support for Alaska. She stated that this is in reference to the need for suicide prevention, education, and "letting voices be heard." She extended her help to the committee.

[8:39:53 AM](#)

MR. BIELA presented a PowerPoint, titled "Engaging Community Through Sources of Strength" [hard copy included in the committee packet. He voiced frustration that suicide prevention programs have not been culturally relevant to rural Alaskans.

He spoke about the peer mentor program, titled "Sources of Strength," as seen on slide 1. He spoke about the history of the program, which began in 1988 for an Indian tribe in North Dakota where there had been many incidences of suicide. He noted that this program is based on a traditional method, pointing out that the training for the program is not done in a normal way. He described it as a strength-based, comprehensive wellness program, which also focuses on substance abuse and domestic violence. He explained that the program uses a relational-connection model, and it is peer led with adult leaders monitoring the youth. He stated that the program focuses on identifying strengths in youth and building positivity. He pointed out the eight cycles of the program, which are mental health, family support, positive friends, mentors, healthy activities, generosity, spirituality, and physical health.

[8:44:30 AM](#)

MR. BIELA pointed out that the Sources of Strength program closed during the COVID-19 pandemic but was reignited in 2022 after an accidental death of a young man in Nightmute. A single student, who was suicidal after this death, restarted the program by making a poster in the school, identifying his strength using the cycle. He stated that this student's action got the whole community involved. He moved from slide 2 to slide 4, stating that the Sources of Strength program hosts family nights in 20 villages. During each family night, one aspect of the Sources of Strength cycle is discussed, with one student sharing his/her strength. He pointed out the photo on the slide of people at a family night, stating, "It gets packed." He stated that during these events, family members would come together, interact, and discover the strength of the youth in the community.

[8:47:10 AM](#)

MR. BIELA moved to slide 5, titled "I am thankful for," and he described this Sources of Strength exercise. He stated that papers are passed out and students share their answers, and afterwards the papers are posted on the school walls, displaying the positive messages. He moved to slide 6 and spoke about the community of Nightmute. He stated that after a typhoon hit the community, the youth cleaned up the community and helped the Elders before the National Guard arrived. Concerning how the program has helped, he stated that before the Sources of Strength program was implemented, Nightmute had the lowest test

scores in the district. He emphasized that now test scores have improved by 60 percent. He explained that the program has helped to implement cultural aspects to healing, and he described a Yup'ik drum that was painted with the Sources of Strength pie chart. He moved to slide 7 and pointed out the audio links on the Sources of Strength pie chart, which shares students speaking about their source of strength. He stated that this is being posted in all the villages on Nelson Island. He noted that this is being translated to Yup'ik.

[8:51:58 AM](#)

MR. BIELA moved to slide 8 and pointed out the preparations students had made for a district volleyball tournament. The slide showed volleyballs painted with the colors of the Sources of Strength emblem. He explained that these students took the volleyballs back to their villages to remind them of the program. He moved to slide 9 and stated that it was decided that teachers should also participate in the Sources of Strength program with an annual conference. He expressed the opinion that the program is working, as test scores are going up, and there have been no student suicides over the past three years. He reiterated that the program is peer led. He stated that people from the national AFSP program visited from the Lower 48 and were impressed at how well the program fit with the culture and traditions of the area. He stated that the students were welcoming to the visitors.

[8:56:57 AM](#)

CHAIR DIBERT thanked Mr. Biela for his service to rural communities in the state.

MR. BIELA, in response to a question from Representative Story, expressed uncertainty about the program in the Juneau School District. He pointed out that all the schools in LKSD have been "pushing" to use the Sources of Strength program. He stated that these schools are unique because LKSD has a department for social workers. He noted that this department was created in 1997 after two people died in a shooting in the Bethel High School. He stated that other school districts have reached out to LKSD concerning the program. He added that he has reached out to Fairbanks, and there has been interest in Ketchikan. In response to a follow-up question, he expressed the understanding that grants fund the program in LKSD. He stated that he would follow up to the committee with more information on the funding.

9:01:58 AM

MR. BIELA, in response to a question from Representative Story, stated that each school in the program would have its own group of peers and one teacher, and this teacher would receive a \$1,000 stipend per year. He stated that the training process for those involved in the program is unique, as there are different team building exercises, with discussions afterward. He stated that, in the end, each program would depend on the community, as the program is about bringing families together, having discussions, and team building. He continued that the teachers meet twice a month and then there is a campaign twice a year to talk about the program. He stated that students come to Bethel once a year for training on team building exercises. He pointed out that now there is a K-5 program. Concerning the funding, he expressed the understanding that there was about \$30,000 to fund the program in LKSD this year. In response to a follow-up question concerning the \$1,000 stipend, he stated that he works as an advisor, and he helps the teachers, but he does not receive the stipend. In response to a follow-up question on outreach, he stated that the new superintendent of LKSD has introduced the program to other districts during regional and state meetings. He pointed out that the LKSD board is 100 percent behind the program.

9:09:19 AM

MR. BIELA, in response to a question from Representative Carrick concerning whether the program would need to be modified for use across the state, explained that the Sources of Strength program could be adopted to any culture in Alaska.

9:11:47 AM

REPRESENTATIVE SCHWANKE commented on the importance of the program and thanked Mr. Biela. She discussed the importance of connecting with nature and being able to communicate openly. She pointed out that, instead of discussing generational healing, generational strengths need to be addressed. She noted that the Sources of Strength program is doing this. She expressed support for place-based education and peer mentorship.

MR. BIELA, in response to comments from Representative Schwanke, noted that he brought five students from Sources of Strength to Juneau and they "did a tremendous job." He pointed out that these students are peer leaders helping other students.

[9:15:25 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STORY expressed appreciation for his presentation. She pointed out that being able to express emotions and grieve is a universal issue.

MR. BIELA expressed the importance of tribal Elders and leaders sharing stories with the youth, as it opens the door to the conversation. He stated that every year in Toksook someone new stands to tell his/her story. Per the funding question, he stated that Title IV of the Higher Education Act federally funds the program, and this is at the district level. He noted that the cost for a trainer to come to the district is \$6,000 for one day.

REPRESENTATIVE STORY expressed the understanding that an individual source of strength would be internal. She expressed appreciation for the sentiment of talking to nature. She expressed the opinion that Alaska would be stronger if more teaching was centered on subsistence.

CHAIR DIBERT expressed agreement and emphasized the importance of subsistence for youth and Elders. She questioned the frequency of family nights.

MR. BIELA, in response, stated that schools would have a family night once a month, with students selecting the section of the pie chart to focus on. He noted that a family night would last for two hours.

REPRESENTATIVE DIBERT expressed appreciation for the family night, as it creates a space for the community to get together and talk.

[9:22:44 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CARRICK addressed the comment in the video about students being isolated after graduation from high school. She pointed out the high rate of suicide for young men out of high school. She questioned whether there are supports set up in the villages for this population of young men.

MR. BIELA, in response, provided the observation that in Toksook and Nightmute, the young men who started the program have since graduated. He stated that these young men have been involved as mentors with students. He pointed out that now there are drugs in Toksook Bay, and this has become a topic among these young

people. He noted that after graduation some of the young men have been able to go to technical school, while a few have joined the military. He stated that the program is only two years old, and this is not enough time to see the real results.

REPRESENTATIVE CARRICK questioned whether the suicide rate has dropped across the entire region.

MR. BIELA responded that across the entire LKSD region there has not been a youth suicide in three years. He stated that students have expressed suicidal thoughts, but they are talking about this now and have not acted. He added that there have been other suicides, but no youth since 2022.

CHAIR DIBERT questioned whether youth would have access to a counselor in the village.

MR. BIELA responded that there are nine social workers with the school district, and these are based in Bethel. He stated that five of these travel to villages to talk to students. As a counselor, he said he travels to seven different villages, and he is out for three and a half weeks before going home for a few days. He stated that this is primarily to talk with the youth, but he could also see adults in the villages. If students need to talk, he said that they can text or email him, and if a student needs more help, there can be a referral to Bethel; however, there would be a four-to-six week wait for an evaluation. He noted that if there is immediate danger, the Village Public Safety Officer would be contacted. In conclusion, he stated that mental health workers are not sent to the villages, so if a therapist is assigned, it would be done through telehealth. He stated that he and other social workers are available twenty-four hours a day, as first responders. He reiterated that there is a four-to-six-week waitlist.

[9:32:34 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STORY questioned how many schools in the region have the Sources of Strength program.

MR. BIELA responded that in LKSD, 23 out of 26 schools have the program.

CHAIR DIBERT questioned whether a student could skip the waitlist in Bethel and go directly to an urban area for help.

MR. BIELA responded that previously a student on a Title 47 could be referred to Anchorage for help; however, now the students must go through Bethel first because of Medicaid restrictions.

[9:34:23 AM](#)

MR. BIELA stated that annually, for seven years, he has been able to present about the program at the Elder and Youth Conference held by the First Alaskans Institute. He stated that this year he would be bringing youth for a workshop on Sources of Strength, showing others how it could be made cultural.

CHAIR DIBERT encouraged committee members to attend the Elders and Youth conference.

MR. BIELA thanked the committee for allowing him to speak about this difficult subject.

[9:37:03 AM](#)

CHAIR DIBERT made closing comments.

[9:37:43 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Tribal Affairs meeting was adjourned at 9:37 p.m.