



Montana Legislative Services Division
Office of Research and Policy Analysis

RESEARCH MEMORANDUM

TO: State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee

FROM: Sheri Scurr, Research Analyst
Substantive content provided by Karl Rosston,
State Suicide Prevention Officer

RE: Veteran suicides and prevention in Montana

DATE: Information provided on March 14, 2016

Purpose and scope

This memorandum responds to the State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee's request at its Feb. 10, 2016, meeting to add to SAVA's work plan an informational briefing on veteran suicides and prevention in Montana. The information contained in this memorandum was provided to staff by Mr. Karl Rosston, LCSW, State Suicide Prevention Coordinator, Department of Public Health and Human Services, in response to staff questions.

Mr. Rosston emphasized when providing this information that the 2015 data is based on 50 suicides in the Montana, which is not a large enough statistically to support conclusions and that only limited inferences may be made.

How many veterans in Montana commit suicide?

- Over the past 10 years, Montana averaged 56 veteran suicides a year. This gives the state a rate of approximately 54 per 100,000 people.
- The national rate of suicide for veterans is 22 per 100,000 people.
- 50 veterans died by suicide in Montana in 2015.
- Of the veteran suicides in 2015, 72% were by firearm (with 97% of the firearm-related suicides being by handgun).
- The average age of the veterans who died by suicide in 2015 in Montana was 61.5 years of age.
- 48 of the 50 veterans who died by suicide in 2015 were male.
- Counties with the highest rate of veteran suicides in 2015 were as follows: Missoula (6), Yellowstone (5), Cascade (5), Lincoln, Lake, Gallatin (4 each), Deer Lodge (3).

How many suicides occurred on reservations or were by Native Americans?

- In 2015, two of the 50 veteran suicides were American Indian, both were men, ages 76 and 83.

What do we know about the causes?

Mr. Rosston stated that the rate of suicide in Montana is due to several factors, including social isolation, limited access to mental health services, alcohol abuse, access to lethal means (firearms), altitude, socio-economic, weather, and most importantly, a stigma against mental illness which limits peoples willingness to ask for help with their depression or anxiety.

Of the 50 veteran suicides in Montana in 2015:

- 32% had a history of suicidal ideations/attempts.
- 60% reported issues of chronic pain or chronic health issues.
- 54% had identified mental health issues, predominantly depression. However, based on reported toxicology reports, none of them had any psychotropic medication in their systems at the time of their deaths, despite 18% of them having been prescribed psychotropic medication.
- 18% had a criminal history, with 87% of the crimes being either DUI's or assault.
- 46% had been divorced, widowed, or separated.
- 36% left a suicide note/message.

What kind of prevention efforts have been made?

- State Suicide Prevention Lifeline. The Lifeline consists of two regional call centers with additional phones, computers, updated data bases, and ensured there are full-time, trained professionals available 24/7.
- State suicide mortality review team. Montana has implemented the first in the nation state suicide review team. Each suicide in Montana is now reviewed to identify factors that led to the suicide and identify possible interventions that may have prevented the death. A summary of the findings have been published and released to the public. Also, family members are sent survivor resources within weeks of the death.

- Risk assessment collaboration with the Department of Justice and the Department of Corrections. There is now an online suicide risk assessment tool that will be web-based and will be provided to every detention center in the state to help during the booking process in identifying those at high risk of suicide.
- State-wide media campaigns. Suicide prevention-related messages are provided through Charter Communication, Montana Broadcaster's Association, Northern Broadcasting Network, Facebook, and Learfield. Facebook ads focus not only on young people in Montana but also on Montana Veterans. The following is a summary of the advertising;
 - Charter estimated that 492,000 Montanans viewed their commercial each week that it was run.
 - According to Facebook statistics, the Montana Suicide Prevention campaign was seen by an average of 74,317 people per day in Montana. This included over 6,800 Montana veterans per day. During every three month period, approximately 13,231 people "clicked" through to the Montana Suicide Prevention website for additional information and resources.
 - The Northern Broadcasting Network has 51 Montana stations and is heard by 248,000 Montanans every week.
 - Learfield Sports Management, who provides media coverage for the University of Montana and Montana State University, estimates that during each football weekend, an estimated 225,000 Montanans heard the commercial and approximately another 42,000 saw the in-stadium commercials on the scoreboards. Coverage is also provided for the basketball season for each school. The state suicide prevention office has sponsored the Military Appreciation games at each university and provided resources to game attendees for self-screening of depression and community resources.
- Law Enforcement Academy Collaboration. The State Suicide Prevention Coordinator is adjunct faculty at the Montana Law Enforcement Academy and teaches mental health and suicide prevention to all new correctional officers and law enforcement officers. Every county correctional facility has been supplied with two sets of anti-suicide smocks and blankets. Mobile training for law enforcement has also been made available to county detention centers around the state.
- Vet to Vet Wellness Program. Funding has been provided for a "Vet to Vet" wellness program at the University of Montana Student Vet Center, which serves more than 700 veterans who are attending the university.

- Signs of Suicide (SOS) kits. SOS kits are provided to high schools around the state. According to the 2015 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, during the 12 months before the survey, 7.9% of all Montanan students in grades 9 through 12 had made a suicide attempt (about 3,700 Montana high school students each year).
- Suicide awareness postcards. Through a partnership with the Montana VA, suicide awareness postcards were sent to over 102,000 veterans in the state. Suicide prevention postcards were also sent to more than 4,000 licensed cosmetologists.
- Training for juvenile probation officers. Mobile suicide prevention training is provided for juvenile probation officers and juvenile detention officers around the state.
- More than 14,000 people have been trained in QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer) around the state and on tribal lands. This is an evidence-based program used world wide. Since the passage of House Bill 373 (2015) concerning suicide prevention training for school personnel, more than 600 teachers and 120 bus drivers have been trained in QPR.
- Suicide Prevention Toolkit for Rural Primary Care Providers are available to be downloaded at www.dphhs.mt.gov/amdd/suicide. Suicide Prevention Toolkit for Senior Living Communities are available for download at www.dphhs.mt.gov/amdd/suicide.
- Suicide prevention community grants have been awarded to numerous counties, including Missoula, Ravalli, Flathead, Gallatin, Cascade, Lewis & Clark, Sanders, Custer, and District II (which encompasses 11 counties in Eastern Montana).
- Core competency training for therapists working with suicidal clients has been provided to 05 therapists from around the state.
- "After a Suicide" information has been distributed to all funeral homes in the state.
- Statewide webinars on the treatment of suicidal and PTSD veterans have been conducted for all VA facilities in Montana.
- More than 15,000 gunlocks with suicide prevention tags have been distributed to 16 counties (health departments and law enforcement) and seven tribal entities. There have also been collaborations with the American College of Physicians and the American Academy of Pediatrics on distributing gunlocks to primary care providers to be handed out to families during wellness visits.

- More than 3,000 people in communities and reservations were trained in ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training).
- More than 300 licensed senior care givers were training in suicide prevention through the Senior and Long Term Care Division.
- There are regularly scheduled semester presentations at Western Montana College, Carroll College, Great Falls College, and Helena College in suicide prevention presented to nursing and education students. The presentations have also been made to counseling students at the University of Montana, Physician Assistant students at Rocky Mountain College, and the residency program at the Billings Clinic.
- Suicide prevention webinars have been provided for physicians and emergency room staff in 27 Montana hospitals. In addition, suicide prevention trainings have been done for primary care providers at Bozeman Deaconess Hospital, Barrett Hospital in Dillon, St James Hospital in Butte, St. Patrick's Hospital in Missoula, Benefis Hospital in Great Falls, and the Billings Clinic.
- More than 4,000 "Quick Reference" guides for suicide prevention have been distributed to chemical dependency facilities and made available to chemical dependency counselors and others around the state.
- More than 10,000 "Parents as Partners: a suicide prevention guide for parents" booklets have been sent to school districts around the state and made available to agencies working with families.
- A yearly two-day conference in providing grief counseling for survivors of suicide is presented in collaboration with the Tamarack Grief Resource Center in Missoula.
- Mr. Rosston collaborates with the Big Sky Psychiatric Association on sponsoring a yearly state-wide suicide prevention conference, bringing in nationally recognized experts in suicide prevention to present to mental health providers and community members from around the state.
- Mr. Rosston collaborated with the Office of Public Instruction in bringing in master trainings to train up to 160 teachers from around the state in implementing the PAXIS Good Behavior Game, an evidence-based program for elementary schools that has been shown to decrease school violence including suicide and bullying through teaching kids resiliency and coping skills.
- Starting in April of 2016, suicide prevention training will be provided to more than 11,000 State employees through live trainings and web-based videos.