

Suicide forum informs people of options

Article published on Wednesday, Nov 17th, 2010

By LOUIS GARCIA

Mirror Writer

According to the 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 23 percent of students in Kodiak in high school have felt sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks in a row or more.

"To me that was staggering. That was a big number," said Emily Arnick, Indian alcohol and substance abuse program manager at Native Village of Afognak, at the start of the Suicide and Substance Abuse Forum Tuesday evening.

Of the same group of students, 7 percent have followed through with an actual suicide attempt.

Suicide isn't exclusive to young people.

"In the Coast Guard we've had a rash of suicides in this past year — higher than normal," said John Eaton, an employee assistance provider on the Worklife staff at the Coast Guard base. "All of the military services right now are experiencing very high levels of suicide."

A suicide on a Coast Guard cutter happened this past March.

The most recent suicide statistics for 2007 reveal Alaska as the leading state in the nation in the number of completed suicides, the third-leading cause of death for young people ages 15 to 24.

The Suicide Forum aimed to inform people of options and solutions when faced with depression in themselves, friends and family.

It helped get people talking about different ways to help, and about personal experiences.

The immediate step for anyone wanting to help is to get involved with SuicideTalk, a community-oriented program exploring issues in suicide prevention, and to consider training on how to help others.

Finding ways to cut down substance abuse is also important because of its relation to suicide. In 2007, 43 percent of those in Alaska who committed suicide were under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

"We all know there's a link between suicide and substance abuse," Arnick said.

Joellen Podoll, community wellness coordinator for Healthy Tomorrows, said the coalition of health care personnel and community leaders has become a member of the Department of Veterans Affairs' Yellow Ribbon program to implement education in schools.

"We're hoping that the high schoolers will get education soon on how they can be empowered to help others. It's very similar to the TALK strategy and teaches the same ideas," she said. "This is on the soon-to-be-doing list."

Lori Graber, a nurse at Providence Kodiak Island Medical Center, attended to see what was available in town.

"I'm here for the resources," she said.

The forums also helped her check the resources and see if they are reliable and established.

As someone who refers patients to services, it raised some questions for her, but also spurred her and others into conversation about possibilities for helping the community.

"It brings up a lot more questions," she said. "Are we prepared for handling this now that we opened up the can of worms? It's kind of likely to be continued. It needs more discussion and identifying the needs of the community. This wasn't the end."

Mirror writer Louis Garcia can be reached via e-mail at lgarcia@kodiakdailymirror.com.