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TOPICAL TOP STORY

suicide prevention

## Hundreds convene in Helena for suicide prevention conference

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A panel of experts hosts a question-and-answer session at the Montana Conference on Suicide Prevention at the Helena Civic Center on Friday.

THOM BRIDGE, Independent Record

### Suicide prevention resources

Veterans Crisis Line 1-800-273-8255 Press 1

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK

Crisis Text Line: Text MT to 741-741

Reducing suicide among veterans was the topic for the 450 health care and suicide prevention advocates who convened in Helena on Friday.

The Montana Conference on Suicide Prevention brings together those working on the issue of suicide to talk about trends in data and new tools and programs available to assist those seeking help with mental health. This year's conference, the seventh annual, focused specifically on veteran suicide and the health professionals who work directly with men and women returning from combat.

### MORE INFORMATION

“Most of you know that Montana has the highest suicide rate in the country,” said Dr. Len Lantz at the opening of the conference. “Our suicide rate is double the national



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average in Montana for our adults and our children and the rate is higher among veterans, the rate is higher in Indian Country as well. We can change that.”

The conference featured speakers specializing in both veteran and community suicide prevention programs.

Juliana Hallows, suicide prevention coordinator at the Montana VA, said officials have seen promising results leveraging data and outreach to contact at-risk veterans. Referrals from its crisis phone line doubled between 2014 and 2018 to more than 482, and “rescues” assisting veterans in crisis also have increased.

“We like to see that – we want people having the courage to say, ‘I need help,’ and for community members to call for help when they need it,” she said.

Breaking an alarming trend over the last several years, suicide did not grow statistically in 2018, data that Hallows called “hopeful,” although all of the speakers acknowledged much more needs to be done.

Suicide is “everyone’s business,” Hallows said, and her experience with Montana has been positive when it comes to creating support communities for veterans struggling.

“Something I love about Montana is that when I’ve looked at my data and I’ve said, ‘We need to do more here,’ communities have risen up and said, ‘We can do it,’” Hallows said.

The conference’s keynote speaker, Wendy Lakso, who works in suicide prevention for the VA at the national level, listed some alarming statistics. Nationally, 46,000 people die by suicide annually, and 20 veterans die by suicide every day with 14 of those outside the care of the VA.

That has placed an emphasis on outreach to veterans outside the VA, she said, and national officials want to learn as much as they can about successful local programs that could be more widely implemented.

When it comes to strategies, Lakso advocates for a “bundled approach” to offer as many support programs as possible, but doing so in a thoughtful way as not all trainings are universal or applicable to everyone working to prevent suicide.

Jess Hegstrom, Lewis and Clark Public Health suicide-prevention health educator, detailed the Man Therapy program launched in Helena last year with the goal of reaching men before they fall into crisis. The program offers resources with a humorous bent to help break down the stigma for men seeking help. In Montana, men account for 79% of suicides.

“It really connects the dots,” Hegstrom said. “They might not know that they’re struggling with a mental health challenge, but it helps them recognize if they’ve been impulsive, if they’ve been unusually angry or irritable, if they’re very stressed out, that maybe they’re struggling with something.”

So far, the website at <https://lcsuicideprevention.org/> has seen more than 400 online mental health screenings and 50 clicks to the crisis prevention line.

Part of Man Therapy has been the Guys’ Night Out program, offering activities for men to come together in a supportive community. There have been 35 events so far this year, including sausage making, taekwondo and yoga.

The county plans to re-evaluate the program this fall to gauge success and decide whether to continue, Hegstrom said.

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