

## Doctor: One local suicide every 11 weeks

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by [Brent Gardner-Smith](#), Aspen Daily News Staff Writer

The University of Colorado Depression Center is recommending that Aspen create a new agency to coordinate local mental health services and develop a countywide suicide prevention program.

“There is an opportunity, and a need, in our opinion, for a new entity to take on a leadership role,” said Dr. Alexis Giese, the project’s director and the director of community programs for the Depression Center, which is part of the school of medicine at University Colorado Denver.

The yearlong study was commissioned by the Aspen Valley Medical Foundation and the results were released Thursday at a press conference at the Hotel Jerome.

The suicide rate in Pitkin County has been as much as two times the state rate and three times the national rate in recent years, according to the study.

“The psychological space of the valley really includes Pitkin County, and parts of Eagle and Garfield,” said Dr. Michael Allen, the director of research at the Depression Center. “And when I went to the state’s database and drilled down to the zip code level to see who you guys cared about that might be killing themselves, you have a suicide in the valley about every 11 weeks. So, you are just about getting over one when the next one happens.”

The Depression Center is recommending that a “comprehensive suicide prevention plan” be started in the Aspen area.

“We know that just doing some one-shot trainings and things like that can help for a very short period of time, but if they are not ongoing and not sustainable they are not going to be part of the fabric of the community, and that’s what we need here to address Aspen’s very high rate of suicide,” said Matt Vogl, the manager of the study for the Depression Center.

The study calls for a full-time suicide prevention coordinator to arrange training for local agencies, schools and the general public.

“We’re also recommending that there be a strengthening of survivor support services because of so many family members and friends that have been touched very tragically and personally by suicide, and we want more resources for them as well,” Vogl said.

Conducting local media campaigns to reduce the stigma about suicide and mental illness is another recommendation of the study.

“We know that nationally, in any community, the stigma against asking for help on behavioral health issues, or receiving that help, is often an obstacle for people and that can result in additional suicides,” Vogl said. “We really want to address the issue of stigma. I think it is high in any community and I think it is perhaps even higher here in Aspen.”

Some of the factors that contribute to the Aspen area’s high rate of suicide include the local high rate of alcohol abuse, an older population, residents who’ve moved here from somewhere else and have left their “family of origin,” and the economic disparity in the valley, which causes people to live far away from their jobs and increases social isolation.

The primary recommendation from the Depression Center is to “create a new lead agency to develop the needed new services and programming, integrate them with existing programs, services and agencies, and provide leadership coordination for behavioral health and wellness activities in the Aspen community.”

The study finds that among the “most-needed services” in the Aspen area are a “single point of entry that provides a user-friendly way to access services, locally based emergency and urgent care for persons in behavioral health crises, and medically supervised outpatient detoxification services based in the Aspen community.”

Dr. Giese, the project’s director, said Aspen has a lot of medical and mental health resources, but it needs someone to help patients get the care they need, when they need it.

“Psychiatric in-patient services are very limited in Colorado, and the purpose of this study was not to try to fix that,” Dr. Giese said. “That need will always be there, but there are a number of people, however, who need something short of that. They are in crisis, they need to get started in treatment right away. So we have several recommendations to provide intensive crisis intervention and brief treatment services upvalley, here in the local community, that could help people get the treatment they need right away, get the crisis addressed, and get them into ongoing treatment.”

Kris Hoegh Marsh, the president and CEO of the Aspen Valley Medical Foundation, said her organization first started working on the issue of suicide four or five years ago when there were 17 suicides in the valley in the first six months of the year.

That led to an initial local conference with 300 citizens called “The Divided Self: Crisis in Paradise.”

“We knew that suicide and substance abuse was not a chamber of commerce issue, that people really didn’t want to hear about pain and suffering in this community — the community of recreation and happiness and drinking and partying and so forth, and the land of beautiful people,” Hoegh Marsh said. “We proceeded in spite of the fact that we weren’t sure the community was really willing to listen.”

But Marsh soon heard from many community members who were in fact concerned about the issue, including one man who was advised last year by doctors in Denver not to bring his suicidal teenage daughter back to Aspen because of the lack of quality mental health services here. That prompted the foundation to take action and work with the Depression Center on the study.

Dr. Allen of the center said that he has been impressed so far with the Aspen community’s willingness to help address its suicide problem. One of his early tasks as part of the Depression Center’s work in the valley was to train the people most likely to encounter a suicidal person — local medical first responders.

“We were able to train something like two-thirds of first responders in the valley within a matter of a few months and begin to branch out into local businesses as well,” Dr. Allen said. “What Aspen has demonstrated in every phase of this process is its openness and ability to work on problems, including suicide, which is a very big problem.”

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Matt Vogl, project manager for a study from the Depression Center at the University of Colorado Denver School of Medicine, discussed a new study about suicide in Aspen during a press conference Thursday at the Hotel Jerome. Also pictured, from left, are Dr. Michael Allen, research director and Dr. Marshall Thomas, executive director of the Depression Center; and Kris Marsh, president and CEO of the Aspen Valley Medical Foundation. “We know that just doing some one-shot trainings and things like that can help for a very short period of time, but if they are not ongoing and not sustainable, they are not going to be part of the fabric of the community and that’s what we need here to address Aspen’s very high rate of suicide,” said Vogl.