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\*\*\* FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE \*\*\*

**With the state suicide rate nearly twice the national average, top state health official urges residents to learn the warning signs and get help for those in need**

CHEYENNE - Suicide is a serious problem in Wyoming but people can learn how to recognize the warning signs and intervene to slow the silent epidemic, Wyoming Department of Health Director, Dr. Brent Sherard, said today.

"Every year about 100 Wyoming residents die by suicide," Sherard said. "I've known some people personally who have taken this tragic step and the impact on those left behind - including family, friends, and coworkers - is often unshakable. Fortunately, if people learn the risk factors and warning signs they may be able to save a life and avoid tremendous heartbreak."

He said that Wyoming has the highest rate of completed suicides in the country, at nearly twice the national average. In 2002, the suicide rate in Wyoming was 21/100,000 persons and it was the second leading cause of death among Wyoming residents between the ages of 15 to 44.

Sherard said that those who have studied the problem tend to agree that suicide is preventable in most cases with proper detection and treatment. This requires an understanding of the risk factors and warning signs of suicide, as well as the various ways to help someone who may be feeling suicidal. Because approximately 90 percent of suicide victims suffer from some kind of mental illness, particularly depression, it is imperative that persons at risk of engaging in suicidal acts be afforded appropriate mental health options in an environment free from the stigma that historically has surrounded the treatment of mental disorders.

He said that risk factors include previous suicide attempts, the recent loss of a family member, financial or employment difficulties, a history of mental illness, easy access to lethal means (particularly firearms), and impulsive or risk-taking behaviors.

Keith Hotle, the Suicide Prevention Specialist with the Wyoming Department of Health identified some of the warning signs given by a person contemplating suicide as talking about suicide or exhibiting an uncharacteristic preoccupation with death and dying, drastic mood and/or behavioral changes, eating or sleeping disorders, isolating from family or friends, loss of interest in school or social activities, lack of personal care or poor hygiene, and increased drug/alcohol use.

He said that it is important to remember, however, that the warning signs of suicide will vary among individuals, and a person who attempts and/or completes suicide may not appear to have manifested any of the signs prior to the suicidal act.

Hotle suggested the following as ways you can help a person who may be suicidal:

- Take suicidal threats seriously and take immediate action
- Be aware of the warning signs and risk factors
- Don't keep secrets
- Be calm, not judgmental
- Speak with care and compassion and talk directly about suicide
- Encourage the person to share his or her feelings
- Never leave the person alone - call 911 if necessary

- Offer to take the person to a mental health provider
- Encourage the person to give up potentially lethal items
- Contact a reliable family member or close friend
- Follow up later to make sure the person is getting help

Hotle added that while conclusive explanations for the high state suicide statistic remain elusive, reasons commonly given to explain the historically high rates in Wyoming and other Mountain-West states include rural isolation, the lack of adequate mental-health resources, easy access to firearms, and the stigma commonly associated with treatment for mental illness.

As part of its statewide prevention efforts, the Wyoming Department of Health asks the public to join in recognizing September 4-10, 2005 as National Suicide Prevention Week and September 15-24 as Yellow Ribbon Youth Suicide Awareness and Prevention Week. Local activities commemorating these events will be held in communities across the state. For information about suicide prevention activities in Wyoming or for information on how to contact your local suicide prevention coalition, please call Keith Hotle, State Suicide Prevention Specialist for the Wyoming Department of Health at (307) 777-3318.

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## **Frequently Asked Questions about Suicide**

### **Is the state doing anything to help address this problem?**

The State of Wyoming is undertaking serious efforts to help prevent suicide. In a collaborative effort, the Wyoming Suicide Prevention Task Force and Wyoming Department of Health authored "Saving One Life, the State of Wyoming Suicide Prevention Plan" - a broadly-based general blueprint meant to provide guidance to local communities in the design and implementation of suicide prevention plans that meet the unique needs of each such community.

In the 2005 General Session, the State Legislature authorized the Wyoming Department of Health to designate a Suicide Prevention Specialist within the department to lead the state's efforts to promote public awareness and local involvement in suicide prevention. Most recently, Governor Dave Freudenthal issued a pair of proclamations officially designating Sept. 4-10, 2005 as Suicide Prevention Week and Sept. 15-24 as Yellow Ribbon Youth Suicide Awareness and Prevention Week. Wyoming has the highest rate of suicide in the country - nearly twice the national average

### **What is the Wyoming Suicide Prevention Initiative?**

In brief, the Suicide Prevention Initiative is a broad-based program authorized by the Wyoming Legislature during the 2005 General Session to help curb the alarmingly high suicide rate in Wyoming. The overall objective of the program is to establish a comprehensive statewide prevention program that will work closely with local community groups to reduce suicide across the state. Specific goals of the program include updating the State Suicide Prevention Plan, assisting local communities in creating and maintaining suicide prevention programs, providing technical assistance on suicide prevention to state and local groups, maintaining a library of suicide prevention materials, and collecting/disseminating information on best practices for suicide prevention and intervention.

### **What exactly is the State Plan?**

Entitled "Saving One Life," the State of Wyoming Suicide Prevention Plan is a broadly based general blueprint meant to provide guidance to local communities in the design and implementation of suicide prevention plans that meet the unique needs of each such community. The intent of the State Plan is to build on existing efforts and systems, increase collaboration, and reduce duplication of services. The key components of the State Plan are (1) Awareness; (2) Intervention; and (3) Methodology. A copy of the State Plan can be viewed or downloaded at the Mental Health Division's website. One of the chief goals of the Suicide Prevention Initiative over the next few months is to obtain and review public comment on the existing plan and to make any changes to the plan that may be warranted to make it more relevant and responsive to the needs of the citizens of the state.

**What is being done about suicide prevention at the local level?**

Most of the direct prevention efforts occur through local action. In Wyoming, a number of communities have formed local task forces and coalitions designed at preventing suicide and promoting public awareness. Many of these local task forces receive funding from the state for prevention and public awareness activities. For information about local coalition activities and other suicide prevention efforts in your community, contact the closest mental health center. A list of mental health centers in Wyoming can be found on the Wyoming Department of Health's Mental Health Division website at [http://mhd.state.wy.us/treatment/providers\\_action.php](http://mhd.state.wy.us/treatment/providers_action.php).

**Is there someone at the state level who is responsible for implementing the Suicide Prevention Initiative?**

The Suicide Prevention Specialist within the Department of Health, Mental Health Division, has primary responsibility for directing the state's suicide prevention efforts. The Suicide Prevention Specialist is supported by the Wyoming Suicide Prevention Task Force, a partnership of concerned public and private individuals and agencies organized by the Wyoming Department of Health to address suicide in Wyoming. The Suicide Prevention Specialist for Wyoming is Keith Hotle, who can be reached at (307) 777-3318.

People can also get involved with local efforts to reduce suicide in their community. They should contact their nearest Mental Health Center for information about the local Suicide Prevention Coalition and the time and place of the next meeting. For a list of Mental Health Centers in Wyoming go to the Mental Health Division website at: [http://mhd.state.wy.us/treatment/providers\\_action.php](http://mhd.state.wy.us/treatment/providers_action.php).

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For more information, please contact:

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