ALASKA: In rural Alaska, a new approach to fighting suicide emerges

December 18, 2015
News Type: Weekly Spark, Weekly Spark News
State: Alaska

A new way of carrying out suicide prevention is being implemented for young Alaska Natives, a population with one of the highest suicide rates in the U.S. It was successfully implemented in Northwest Alaska and now is being started in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. Through this program, Alaska village residents are gathering at local meetings to discuss the meaning of easy-to-understand data they are given about the problem of suicide in their area and how to address it. Participants include people from the villages’ key institutions, such as health aides, law enforcement officers, school counselors, pastors, and tribal workers. “They can decide how to use their resources to make things better, to use the research for the good,” said Lisa Wexler, a University of Massachusetts associate professor who developed the strategy. “It gives people really practical ways to make a difference.” Although they are receiving help from outside researchers, this strategy is different from many other prevention programs in that the residents themselves make the decisions about the next steps to take. Steps that may be considered include reducing access to lethal means and creating a culture where adults talk more with their children and all community members watch out for each other and support each other in getting help when needed.

Spark Extra! For information on how this program was implemented in Northwest Alaska, see Suicide prevention strategies among Alaska Native youth [2].

Links within this resource