



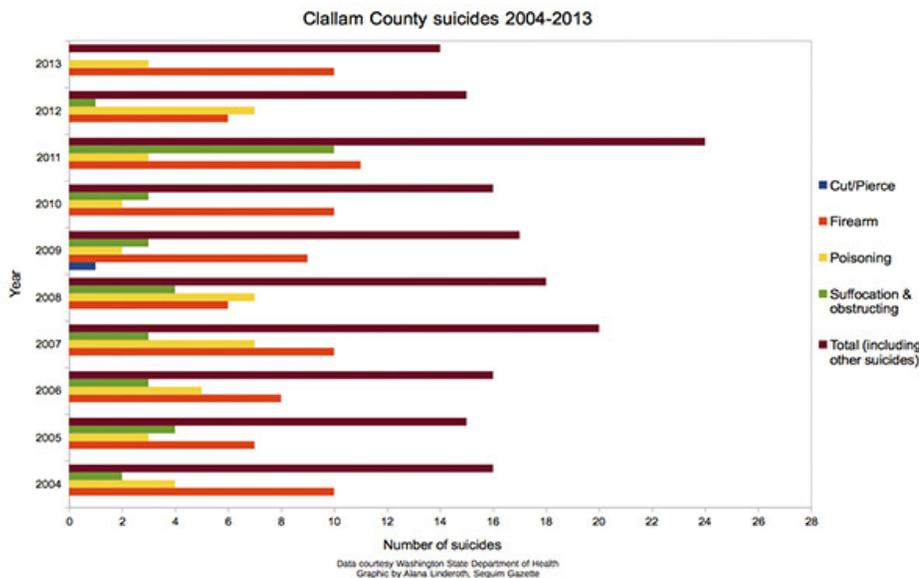
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# Clallam County part of plan to trim suicide rates



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Feb 17, 2016 at 12:00PM

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and **MATTHEW NASH**

*Sequim Gazette*

An executive order from Gov. Jay Inslee earlier this year that looks to prevent suicides statewide and reduce firearm violence may have a local impact in the coming months.

The Jan. 6 order mandates four things: implement the 2014 Washington State Suicide Prevention Plan, collect/review/disseminate more data on gun violence, find gaps in laws and law enforcement in gun crimes and Attorney General Bob Ferguson must update a 2007 review of state and federal laws on gun possession.

Inslee's order states he is taking a public health approach to suicide prevention and firearm violence.

Suicides are by “people who had a moment of depression. Who, if we can get them through it, can have a useful life,” Inslee said.

The Washington State Department of Health reports 665 people died from firearms in Washington from 2012-2014. Of those deaths 520 were ruled suicides.

### **High rates**

Relative to the population, Clallam County is one of 19 counties in the state to have higher firearm fatality rates than the state average from 2005-2014, reports the Department of Health. Between 2004-2014, 196 suicides occurred within the county, equating to nearly 18 suicides per year if divided evenly.

In recent years, all of Clallam County’s suicides occurred in Sequim or Port Angeles with 24 suicides occurring from 2013-2015. Clallam County Sheriff’s Office reports 19 of the 24 suicides were by gunshot.

Sequim Police Department reports from 2013-2015, five suicides occurred, all by firearms.

The governor’s order came out one day after President Barack Obama issued an executive action to reduce gun violence by providing more funding for mental-health treatment and requiring more encompassing background checks for gun sales.

“Suicide is inextricably tied to firearms,” said Karyn Brownson, project manager for the suicide prevention plan. “The real strength of this plan is that it calls on everyone to play a role in suicide prevention by having some coordinated movement and talking to each other.”

Numerous organizations and state departments are tasked with completing Inslee’s order, including the Department of Health.

Iva Burks, Clallam County health and human services director, said her office has not received any orders as of yet in regards to Inslee’s order.

Gaining more specific data about suicide victims, such as sexual orientation and gender identity, is among the orders to be implemented, said Steve Saxe, director of community health systems with the Department of Health.

Health department officials do expect to provide more support and opportunities for involvement at the local level soon, Brownson said. For example, Brownson is working to develop a volunteer speakers’ bureau where volunteers will receive some basic training and then promote the plan in their own workplace and community.

“Right now we’re still in the distribution phase and trying to get the plan into the right people’s hands,” she said. “But, everybody can be a part of suicide prevention.”

### **At risk**

The prevention plan includes data correlating directly to Sequim’s demographics. The plan shows males 65 years and older have the highest rate of suicide in Washington.

In Clallam County, 11 of the 24 suicides from 2013-2015 were victims over the age of 70 and 19 were over 60 with two of those victims female.

“People tend to think suicide is usually by younger people,” Wendy Sisk, Peninsula Behavioral Health clinical director, said. “In our community we see a lot attempts by youth, but more complete suicides by adults.”

Statistics in the prevention plan also concludes that suicide disproportionately affects people in areas of poverty, American Indians and veterans.

However, in Clallam County from 2013-2015, all suicide victims were white, according to the Sheriff’s

Office.

## Prevention

One of the biggest things the state Legislature has done to enhance suicide prevention was to pass the Matt Adler Law in 2013, Sisk said. The law requires all licensed mental health therapists, social workers, occupational therapists, advisers, psychologists and chemical dependency professionals to receive training on suicide assessment, treatment and management.

Every clinician must repeat this training every six years.

In 2014, the law was expanded to require a one-time training for all chiropractors, naturopaths, nurses, physicians, advanced registered nurse practitioners and physician assistants.

Prior to the Matt Adler Law, Sisk and her colleagues at Peninsula Behavioral Health always have done suicide prevention and intervention training “because it’s something we just deal with on a daily basis,” she said.

With clinics located in both Port Angeles and Sequim, the private, nonprofit, licensed mental health and certified chemical dependency treatment organization, Peninsula Behavioral Health aids many struggling from suicidal thoughts or attempts.

In 2015, the organization’s crisis services had 6,147 contacts, Sisk said. Crisis services include a wide range of crises from suicidal thoughts and depression to someone presenting psychotic behaviors.

Although the number of crisis services contacts nearly doubled since 2014, Sisk said she’d always like to see more people using the resources, like the crisis line.

The 24/7 crisis line offered through Peninsula Behavioral Health is available to everyone at no charge. Sisk encourages anyone that’s aware of someone at risk of suicide to call the crisis line and let a mental professional know because they’ll follow up with that individual.

“The number of people passing through our door continues to grow,” Sisk said. “We’ve tried to remain nimble enough to respond to that community need.”

Despite Clallam County’s high suicide rate, there are many more successes made in preventing suicide, Sisk said.

“We see a lot of people who are struggling and have a lot, hundreds, of success throughout the course of a year.”

In Sisk’s many years of experience working on suicide prevention and intervention, it’s been “very rare” that someone who survived a suicide attempt didn’t regret their attempt at suicide, she said.

## Myths

Some common myths surrounding suicide include the idea that talking about suicide will give someone the idea and cause them to act on it, according to a presentation by Sisk.

Additionally, it’s often thought, but untrue, that more suicides happen around the holidays. In fact, more suicides occur during the spring than any other time of year.

Lastly, it’s not young men who are at the highest risk for suicide, but again, it’s older adults.

“There’s a perpetual fear out there about bringing up suicide, but just asking the question is probably one of the biggest interventions someone could do,” Sisk said. “By talking about suicide, it opens the door to conversation and lets someone know that someone else cares about them.”

Peninsula Behavioral Health officials work closely with Olympic Medical Center because people in crisis often will gravitate to the emergency room because they know someone will be there to help them, Sisk said.

Quoting Phil Donahue, Sisk noted "Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem."

Something Sisk believes would aid in reducing the number suicides is if more funding were put toward prevention efforts. Financial support for prevention services in mental health is almost "nonexistent," she said. However, more support for prevention services could help catch those before they're in a crisis situation, she added.

"The hope is always that if we can get people to reach out, or get them to reach out to us, then we can save lives," she said.

If you're interested in becoming part of the volunteer speakers bureau and help promote the state suicide prevention plan, contact Brownson at 360-236-2803 or e-mail [Karyn.brownson@doh.wa.gov](mailto:Karyn.brownson@doh.wa.gov).

### **Access to suicide prevention, warning signs**

#### **• Peninsula Behavioral Health**

- What: Licensed mental health and certified chemical dependency treatment organization.
- Phone: 457-0431 or 681-0585 (Sequim office)
- Website: [peninsulabehavioral.org](http://peninsulabehavioral.org)
- Address: 118 E. Eighth St., Port Angeles. Or 490 N. Fifth Ave., Sequim

#### **• Crisis hotlines**

- The National Suicide Hotline: 1-800-273-8255, or text at 741741.
- Crisis Line of the Peninsulas (Clallam, Jefferson and Kitsap counties): 452-4500
- Peninsula Behavioral Health 24/7 hotline: 457-0431

#### **• Washington State Suicide Prevention Plan:**

[www.doh.wa.gov/YouandYourFamily/InjuryandViolencePrevention/SuicidePreventionPlan](http://www.doh.wa.gov/YouandYourFamily/InjuryandViolencePrevention/SuicidePreventionPlan)

#### **• Warning signs of suicide:**

- Threatening or talking about hurting and killing oneself
- Seeking access to firearms, pills or other means
- Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide, when these actions are out of the ordinary
- Feeling hopeless
- Feeling rage or uncontrolled anger or seeking revenge
- Substance abuse
- Withdrawing from friends, family and society
- Feeling anxious, agitated or unable to sleep or sleeping all the time
- Dramatic mood changes
- Seeing no reason for living or having no sense of purpose

\* More information on warning signs can be found at, [www.suicidology.org/resources/warning-signs](http://www.suicidology.org/resources/warning-signs).