

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

LEGISLATIVE BUDGET AND AUDIT COMMITTEE

Division of Legislative Audit



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SUMMARY OF: A Sunset Review of the Department of Health and Social Services
Statewide Suicide Prevention Council, November 15, 2004.

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

In accordance with Title 24 and Title 44 of the Alaska Statutes (sunset legislation), we have reviewed the activities of the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council (SSPC). The purpose of this audit was to determine if there is a demonstrated public need for the continued existence of the council.

Legislative intent requires consideration of this report during the legislative oversight hearings to determine whether the termination date of the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council should be extended. The law currently specifies the council will terminate on June 30, 2005.

REPORT CONCLUSIONS

Our primary conclusion is the termination date of the council should be extended. We recommend that the legislature extend the termination date for the council to June 30, 2009. We also have concluded that the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) hindered the efforts of the council by providing inadequate financial information to the council and by diverting almost 20 percent of the council's FY 04 funding for non-related expenditures.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Division of Behavioral Health (DBH) Community-based Suicide Prevention Program coordinator should ensure prevention programs conform to the Statewide Suicide Prevention Plan.

Now that SSPC has a statewide suicide prevention plan in place, we believe the various community-based suicide prevention plans, at a minimum, should be consistent with the statewide plan. Developing procedures that require grant applicants to certify and explain how their grant activities and community plans are consistent with the state plan will provide more assurance that this particular state funding is being implemented in a manner consistent with the centrally-developed state plan.

Accordingly, we recommend DBH modify the grant application process as necessary, requiring communities to read the statewide prevention plan and certify their local plan is consistent with the state plan. Further, we recommend that DBH report to SSPC regarding these grant applications and talk about how the various community-based efforts are consistent with the council's plan.

2. The Administrative Manager for DHSS Boards and Commissions and staff to the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council should develop a more formalized, informative system of reporting financial information to the council.

Eighty percent of the FY 04 operating budget for the council was either lapsed or spent for items that were not directly related to suicide prevention activities. While it is unclear whether DHSS management actively prohibited the council from spending much of their funding, it is clear SSPC did not receive consistent and informative financial reports from the department.

Accordingly, we recommend the administrative manager develop a comprehensive, informative format for tracking and reporting expenditure activity for SSPC and develop understandable, reliable reports on a consistent basis to assist the council in the use of its appropriated funding.

3. The council should ensure it provides public notice of all council meetings.

Since its inception in 2001, the council did not give adequate public notice of two of its 12 meetings. No public notice was provided on either the State of Alaska's online public notice system or through publication in widely-circulated state newspapers. Additionally, the agendas for three of the council meetings did not provide periods for public comment.

We recommend the council ensure that all meetings are publicly noticed, ensure that the method of notice is consistent and provide opportunity for public comment. We also recommend the council consider posting its meeting schedule on SSPC website.

4. The Office of the Governor should make appointments to the council in a timely manner.

SSPC activities were also hampered by delays in appointments made to the council. We recommend the Office of the Governor makes appointments to the council in a timely manner.

November 16, 2004

Members of the Legislative Budget
and Audit Committee:

In accordance with the provisions of Title 24 and Title 44 of the Alaska Statutes (sunset legislation), the attached report is submitted for your review.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES
STATEWIDE SUICIDE PREVENTION COUNCIL
SUNSET REVIEW

November 15, 2004

Audit Control Number

06-20037-05

This audit was conducted as required by AS 44.66.050 and under the authority of AS 24.20.271(1). Alaska Statute 44.66.050(c) lists criteria to be used to assess the demonstrated public need for a given board, commission, agency, or program subject to the sunset review process. Currently under AS 44.66.010(a)(20), the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council is scheduled to terminate June 30, 2005. If the legislature takes no action to extend this date, the council would have one year to conclude operations.

In our opinion, the termination date for the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council should be extended. The council serves a public need and is operating in the public's interest. We recommend the legislature extend the council's termination date to June 30, 2009.

The audit was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government audit standards. Fieldwork procedures utilized in the course of developing the findings and discussion presented in this report are discussed in the Objectives, Scope, and Methodology.

Pat Davidson, CPA
Legislative Auditor

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OBJECTIVES, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

In accordance with Titles 24 and 44 of the Alaska Statutes, we have reviewed the activities of the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council (SSPC) to determine if there is a demonstrated public need for its continued existence and if it has been operating in an efficient and effective manner.

As required by AS 44.66.050(a), the legislative committee of reference shall consider this report as part of the oversight process in determining if the council should be reestablished. State law currently specifies SSPC will terminate on June 30, 2005. If no action is taken by the legislature, the council will have one year from that date to conclude its administrative operations.

Objectives

The two central, interrelated objectives of our report are:

1. To determine if the termination date of the council should be extended.
2. To determine if the council is operating in the public interest.

Our assessment of the operations and performance of the council was based on criteria set out in AS 44.66.050(c). Criteria set out in this statute relate to the determination of a demonstrated public need for the council.

Scope and Methodology

Our audit reviewed the operations and activities of the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council from FY 02 through the first quarter of FY 05.

During the course of our examination, we reviewed and evaluated the following:

- Applicable statutes and regulations.
- Budget documents, session laws, and other legislative information related to the council's operations.
- Council meeting minutes, bi-laws and website.
- Annual reports to the legislature and governor.
- Financial reports from the State Accounting System.

- The *Statewide Suicide Prevention Plan*.
- Alaska Injury Prevention Center's follow-back study reports to the council.
- The Surgeon General's *Call to Action to Prevent Suicide*.
- Other documents related to the council's operations and mission, as necessary.

In addition, we interviewed:

- Various SSPC members, SSPC coordinators and staff under the Department of Health and Social Services.
- Executive directors of the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, Alaska Mental Health Board and Governor's Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse.
- Directors of suicide prevention programs in Washington, Oregon, Montana, and Wyoming.

We also attended the June and September 2004 SSPC meetings, the September suicide survivor community gathering and the World Suicide Prevention Day commemoration. At these meetings and gatherings, we observed the proceedings and the interaction of the board with the public.

ORGANIZATION AND FUNCTION

In 2001, Alaska Statute 44.29.300 established the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council in the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS). Under AS 44.29.350, the council is charged with advising the legislature and the governor on “...actions that can and should be taken to improve health and wellness throughout the state by reducing suicide and its effect on individuals, families, and communities.”

In addition to this advisory role, the council’s scope of activities include developing Alaska’s statewide suicide prevention plan, educating the public about suicide, providing suicide prevention training to teachers, students and others, coordinating suicide prevention efforts statewide and providing technical assistance to communities as they develop their own plans.

The council consists of 15 members. There are two members of the Alaska State Senate, two members of the House of Representatives, two executive branch employees and nine public members. The Alaska State Senate seats and the House of Representative seats are appointed by the president of the senate and the speaker of the house, respectively. The executive branch and public seats are appointed by the governor.

Statutes require that public appointments ensure broad representation from various communities statewide. Public members are selected from rural and urban communities as well as from the educational, youth, faith-based and behavioral health communities.¹ As such, each public member appointed to the council brings unique experiences and perspective to a shared vision and mission. Except for the representatives who serve two years, council members serve staggered four-year terms.

Council Members

As of September 30, 2004

Jeanine Sparks, Public, Chair
Judith Lethin, Public
William Martin, Public
Bill Hogan, DHSS
Tracy Barbee, Public
Noelle Hardt, Public
Kelsi Ivanoff, Public
Charles Jones, Public
Representative Mary Kapsner
Representative Pete Kott
Senator Georgianna Lincoln
Karen Perdue, Public
Susan Soule, DHSS
Senator Ben Stevens
Stan Tucker, Public

The council is staffed by a coordinator, who, by statute, is employed by the council and directly responsible to the council. Currently the council employs the coordinator on a part-time basis. The council receives administrative assistance from DHSS.

¹ AS 44.29.300 specifies the public seats be filled by “one member of the Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse; one member of the Alaska Mental Health Board; one person recommended by the Alaska Federation of Natives, Inc.; one person who is a counselor in a secondary school; one adult who is active in a statewide youth organization; one person who has experienced the death by suicide of a member of the person’s family; one person who resides in a rural community in the state that is not connected by road or the Alaska marine highway to the main road system of the state; one person who is a member of the clergy; and one person who is under the age of 18.”

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REPORT CONCLUSIONS

We reviewed operations of the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council (SSPC) from FY 02 through the first quarter of FY 05. Our primary conclusion is the termination date of the council should be extended. We also have concluded that the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) hindered the efforts of the council by providing inadequate financial information to the council and by spending almost 20 percent of SSPC's FY 04 funding for unrelated expenditures. More extensive discussion of these conclusions follows.

The termination date of the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council should be extended

Under AS 44.29, SSPC is charged with advising the legislature and governor on suicide and suicide prevention in Alaska. Suicide has historically been, and continues to be, a major state public health problem. According to the council's suicide prevention plan, an average of 126 Alaskan lives is lost each year to suicide. The state's 2002 rate of 20.9 deaths for every 100,000 residents, almost twice the national average of 10.6, ranked Alaska sixth among the states in rate of suicide.

Recently the council completed a statewide suicide prevention plan, one of SSPC's duties under state law. The plan establishes goals and strategies for suicide prevention. The plan also identifies various measures to be used to evaluate progress in reducing Alaska's suicide rate. In addition to developing the suicide prevention plan, council duties include educating the public about suicide, providing suicide prevention training, coordinating suicide prevention efforts statewide and providing technical assistance to communities as they develop their own plans. Through these various roles, the council operates in the public interest in a manner consistent with its statutory responsibility.

Currently, AS 44.66.010(a)(20) requires that the council be terminated on June 30, 2005. If not extended by legislature, the council will have one year to administratively conclude its operations. In our opinion, SSPC is operating in the public interest. Now that the suicide prevention plan is complete, we encourage the council to continue with implementation of suicide prevention strategies (see Recommendation No. 1 for an example of such implementation). We recommend the legislature extend the termination date for the council to June 30, 2009.

Misspent funds and miscommunications limited SSPC spending to 20% of FY 04 funding

In FY 04, the council was appropriated more than \$200,000 by the legislature for council operations and suicide prevention activities. A line-item veto by the Governor reduced the appropriation to \$179,800, which was subsequently further reduced to \$171,400 as part of an add/delete supplemental² requested by DHSS.

² See Section 20 Chapter 159 SLA 2004.

Five months into FY 04, SSPC's acting coordinator, who was also a DHSS employee and a member of the council, believed she was being told that access to the operating funding was restricted. The acting coordinator told us she was instructed by the Director of the Division of Administrative Services (DAS)³ that the council was not to spend any further money on its operations. The director denies she ever gave such instruction or advice.

In any event, in light of direction the individual believed she received, the council did not convene its third quarterly meeting originally scheduled to be held in January 2004. This action delayed work on the council's drafting of the statewide suicide prevention plan by several months.

Toward the end of the fiscal year, DAS restructured the council's funding, increasing the allocation for supplies by \$32,200. This was done to enable DHSS to commit almost \$32,000, or 19 percent of the council's FY 04 budget, to purchase office furnishings for another DHSS agency with no direct operational relationship to suicide prevention.⁴

The council did not authorize, nor was the council aware of, the expenditure which did not contribute directly to SSPC operations or suicide prevention efforts (see Recommendation No. 2).

Exhibit 1		
Statewide Suicide Prevention Council Summary of FY 04 Expenditures (Unaudited)		
	<u>Expenditures</u>	As Percentage of <u>Authorization</u>
Council-related Costs	\$ 34,700	20.2%
Office Furnishings	31,700	18.5%
Lapse	10,100	5.9%
Working Reserve Sweep:		
Terminal Leave	91,500	53.4%
Insurance Catastrophe	<u>3,400</u>	<u>2.0%</u>
	<u>\$171,400</u>	<u>100.0%</u>

As summarized in Exhibit 1, at the end of FY 04, \$94,900 of SSPC's remaining balance was transferred into the state's terminal leave and insurance catastrophe working reserve accounts. While such transfers are permissible under state law,⁵ the funding was largely available because council funds were either intentionally or unintentionally restricted from council use. As a result, funding appropriated for suicide prevention was spent on items that

³ Now Finance and Management Services under the most recent DHSS reorganization.

⁴ As of October 15, 2004, \$27,524 of the commitment was spent.

⁵ AS 37.05.510(b) mandates the Department of Administration accumulate funding to various working reserve accounts, such as the one set up for terminal leave for state employees, by "charging the unencumbered balance of any appropriation enacted to finance the payment of employee salaries and benefits that is determined to be available for lapse at the end of the fiscal year."

did not benefit the council's central mission. In the end, only \$34,647, or 20 percent, of the council's FY 04 budget was actually spent on council activities.

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FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation No. 1

The Division of Behavioral Health (DBH) Community-based Suicide Prevention Program coordinator should ensure prevention programs conform to the Statewide Suicide Prevention Plan.

The Community-based Suicide Prevention Program (CBSPP) was established in 1989 to provide financial support and assistance primarily to small, rural communities to carry out activities that would contribute to preventing suicide. The program is administered by DBH. In FY 04, 52 communities received more than \$763,000 in funding to implement suicide prevention programs in their community. As part of the grant application process, applicants must submit community suicide prevention plans to the DBH program coordinator.

Historically, community plans have included activities directly focused on suicide prevention as well as cultural, social and recreational activities aimed at strengthening relationships and dialogue within the communities. With some communities, the emphasis is on social and recreational events more than activities with a direct relationship to suicide prevention. However, the community coordinator, typically a part-time employee funded by the grant, has received some suicide prevention training. Grantees submit monthly activity reports to the DBH program coordinator.

Although their missions are directly related, SSPC has no involvement with the community-based suicide prevention program grant award process. While the primary role of the council is to serve in advisory capacity to the legislature and the governor, under AS 44.29.350(3)-(6) such advice is regarding actions necessary to:

- (3) *enhance suicide prevention services and programs throughout the state;*
- (4) *develop **healthy communities** through comprehensive, collaborative, community-based and faith-based approaches;*
- (5) *develop and **implement** a statewide suicide prevention plan;*
- (6) ***strengthen existing and build new partnerships** between public and private entities that will advance suicide prevention efforts in the state. [emphases added]*

Now that SSPC has a statewide suicide prevention plan in place, we believe as a first step, the various community-based suicide prevention plans, at a minimum, should be consistent with the statewide plan. Developing procedures that require grant applicants to certify and explain how their grant activities and community plans are consistent with the state plan will

provide more assurance that this particular state funding is being implemented in a manner consistent with the centrally-developed state plan.

Accordingly, we recommend DBH modify the grant application process as necessary, requiring communities to read the statewide prevention plan and certify their local plan is consistent with the state plan. Further, we recommend that DBH report to SSPC regarding these grant applications and talk about how the various community-based efforts are consistent with the council's plan.

Recommendation No. 2

The Administrative Manager for DHSS Boards and Commissions and the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council coordinator should develop a more formalized, informative system of reporting financial information to the council.

As discussed in the conclusions section of this report, 80 percent of the FY 04 operating budget for the council was either lapsed or spent for items that were not directly related to suicide prevention activities. While it is unclear whether DHSS management actively prohibited the council from spending much of their funding, it is clear that in FY 04 SSPC did not receive consistent and informative financial reports from the department. Turnover in the coordinator's position and extensive use of "borrowed" personnel to fill in as part-time acting coordinator made clear communication of financial and budgetary information even more critical. Additionally, such reporting is an important function for a state agency to carry out when charged with providing administrative support to a council consisting largely of members from the general citizenry.

While the minutes for half of the council meetings reflected some discussion of finances, the discussion primarily focused on the funding appropriated, with limited or no discussion of council expenditures and available balances. Although the administrative manager for Boards and Commissions reported she provided financial reports to the council, we saw no evidence the council received regular financial reports. The former coordinator and members of the council we interviewed reported they did not believe they consistently received adequate financial information from DHSS.

As reflected in the conclusions section and the following analysis of public need section, we believe the council accomplished its central mission and responsibility. However, the council was hindered by inadequate administrative support from DHSS – especially in the use of SSPC's FY 04 appropriation. Accordingly, we recommend the administrative manager develop a comprehensive, informative format for tracking and reporting expenditure activity for SSPC and develop understandable, reliable reports on a consistent basis to assist the council in the use of its appropriated funding.

Recommendation No. 3

The council should ensure it provides public notice of all council meetings.

Alaska Statute 44.62.310 requires public notice of all public entity meetings. Since its inception, the council did not give adequate public notice of two of its 12 meetings. No public notice was provided on either the State of Alaska's online public notice system or through publication in widely-circulated state newspapers. Additionally, the agendas for three of the council meetings did not provide periods for public comment.

By not publicly announcing all meetings and not scheduling periods for public comment, the council may inadvertently send the message that public participation is not essential to SSPC operations. Given the planning, coordination, education, training and technical support objectives of the council's statutory mandate, it is crucial that involvement of, and interaction with, the public be done.

We recommend the council ensure that all meetings are publicly noticed, ensure that the method of notice is consistent and provide opportunity for public comment. We also recommend the council consider posting its meeting schedule on SSPC website.

Recommendation No. 4

The Office of the Governor should make appointments to the council in a timely manner.

Besides the lack of effective access to FY 04 funding, SSPC activities were also hampered by delays in appointments made to the council. In March of 2003, four of the 11 seats for which the Office of the Governor was responsible for appointing were vacant. In March of 2004 there were again four seats vacant. Some of the positions on the council had been left vacant over a year. As of June 2004, all council seats had been filled.

These numerous and extended periods of vacancy in member seats hindered the council's operations. The council has many challenges related to its suicide prevention work, vacancies in member seats should not be one of them. For the council to operate effectively and efficiently, it must be fully appointed and appointments must be timely. We recommend the Office of the Governor makes appointments to the council in a timely manner.

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ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC NEED

The following analyses of council activities relate to the public need factors defined in AS 44.66.050(c). These analyses are not intended to be comprehensive, but address those areas we were able to cover within the scope of our review.

<i>The extent to which the board, commission, or program has operated in the public interest.</i>
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To assess whether the council has operated in the public interest, we measured the council's activities against the six objectives set out by the legislature for SSPC in state law, at AS 44.29.350.⁶ From our review of council activities, we conclude SSPC has reasonably addressed its statutory objectives. Activities and accomplishments of the council have included the following:

1. Advising the executive branch agencies and the legislature. The council advises the legislature and governor on suicide and suicide prevention efforts through annual reports, which are presented jointly to the House and Senate Committees on Health, Education and Social Services. Presentations to the legislature also include council member testimony.⁷
2. Increasing public awareness of the issue of suicide. To increase public awareness, the council maintains a website that provides information on suicide statistics, risk factors and prevention. The council's annual reports and the Statewide Suicide Prevention Plan are also available through the website. The council has conducted over 20 workshops and presentations.

The council recently commemorated World Suicide Prevention Day on September 10, 2004. The event included various speakers, distribution of the final Statewide Suicide Prevention Plan and presentation of the suicide prevention posters commissioned by the council. Both this event and the council's June 30, 2004 meeting received media coverage.

⁶ AS 44.29.350 states "*The council shall serve in an advisory capacity to the legislature and the governor with respect to what actions can and should be taken to (1) improve health and wellness throughout the state by reducing suicide and its effects on individuals, families, and communities; (2) broaden the public's awareness of suicide and the risk factors related to suicide; (3) enhance suicide prevention services and programs throughout the state; (4) develop healthy communities through comprehensive, collaborative, community-based and faith-based approaches; (5) develop and implement a statewide suicide prevention plan; and (6) strengthen existing and build new partnerships between public and private entities that will advance suicide prevention efforts in the state*".

⁷ Due to turnover in the coordinator position, the council did not appear before the legislature to present its 2004 annual report.

3. Providing technical assistance and support for activities related to suicide prevention. Other activities the council has been involved in include: certification of Careline;⁸ Division of Behavioral Health's Targeted Gatekeeper Training⁹ and training to help students, teachers and others recognize the signs of suicidal behavior and intervene appropriately.
4. Building and strengthening faith-based partnerships. The council has convened two clergy and clinician conferences, one in Wasilla and one in Fairbanks. The purpose of these events is to increase dialogue, collaboration and partnership between the faith-based and clinician-based approaches to suicide prevention.
5. Collaborating on planning activities with other related agencies. Recently, the council has begun collaborating on a comprehensive, integrated mental health plan with DHSS, the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, the Alaska Mental Health Board, the Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, the Alaska Commission on Aging and the Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education.

The extent to which the operation of the board, commission, or agency program has been impeded or enhanced by existing statutes, procedures, and practices that it has adopted, and any other matter, including budgetary, resource, and personnel matters.

There are a variety of issues that have had a negative impact on the operations of the council including:

1. Misspent funding. In FY 04, DHSS spent 19 percent of the council's funding on office furnishings for a departmental agency that has no direct operational relationship to suicide prevention (see Report Conclusions section of this report).
2. Inadequate communication of financial information to SSPC. In FY 04, activities of the council were limited by the lack of clear and consistent financial information from DHSS (see Report Conclusions section of this report).
3. Coordinator turnover, council seat vacancies and meeting absenteeism. The council's operations have been impeded by high turnover in the coordinator's position and by numerous and long-term vacancies in council seats.

In its relatively short existence, the council has had three coordinators. The first coordinator was hired directly by the council and served full-time from April 2002 to

⁸ Careline refers to Alaska's statewide toll-free crisis intervention and assistance hotline.

⁹ DBH has contracted for the development of a training curriculum specific to Alaska. Gatekeepers are individuals who have face-to-face contact with large numbers of people in their community. The council's role in the initiative is to review the curriculum developed and provide feedback.

June 2003. The second coordinator is an employee of DHSS and served as part-time staff from November 2003 to January 2004. The current coordinator is also an employee of DHSS who began her part-time service in February 2004.

On March 1, 2003 four of the 11 council seats the Office of the Governor is responsible for appointing were vacant and on March 1, 2004 four seats were again vacant. From council meeting minutes, it appears the Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse seat was vacant almost a year, the Alaska Mental Health Board seat was vacant one and a half years and the rural seat was vacant over one year. Reportedly these vacancies were due to delays in filling the positions, rather than lack of qualified applicants (see Recommendation No. 4).

Despite these challenges, the council has operated reasonably effectively over its three-year existence. SSPC did accomplish its primary operational objective – the development of the state’s suicide prevention plan.

Additionally, the council requested and received an appropriation from the 2002 legislature to conduct a suicide prevention follow-back study.¹⁰ The purpose of the follow-back study is to analyze retrospectively circumstances surrounding suicides, to develop profiles of victims and to identify potential interveners. To this end, the study includes reviewing records and interviewing individuals who had special relationships with the victims. The study benefits the public interest by gathering information that will be used to develop suicide prevention programs tailored to Alaskan needs. The study is expected to be completed the spring of 2005.

The extent to which the board, commission, or agency has recommended statutory changes that are generally of benefit to the public interest.

The council did not pursue statutory changes.

The extent to which the board, commission, or agency has encouraged interested persons to report to it concerning the effect of its regulations and decisions on the effectiveness of service, economy of service, and availability of service that it has provided.

In general, the council provides public notice of meetings and schedules public comment periods. The council holds four meetings per year, usually in Anchorage or Juneau.¹¹ Additionally, the public has the opportunity to contact the council through its website and offer feedback on the council’s effectiveness.

¹⁰ The funding consisted \$300,000 in general funds and a \$100,000 Mental Health Trust match.

¹¹ The council has also convened in Sitka and Kodiak.

While most council meetings are open to the public and, for the most part, provide periods for public comment, statutes require public notice of all meetings. We found no evidence that two of the 12 meetings were publicly noticed either through the state online public notice system or in the newspapers. Additionally, three meetings did not provide periods for public comment (see Recommendation No. 3).

The extent to which the board, commission, or agency has encouraged public participation in the making of its regulations and decisions.

Under AS 44.29.300, the council was tasked with developing and implementing a statewide suicide prevention plan. From the outset, the council's position has been that the plan is a collaborative effort between the state and the public. As such, the council has encouraged public involvement in a number of ways.

Before beginning work on the plan, the council sought input from service providers on what programs were needed. After the council drafted the first version, the plan was widely distributed¹² and made available on its website. The council received approximately 30 responses.

The final plan provides sample templates for four communities: a local church, a small Alaska Native village, the Alaska Mental Health Board and a residential school. Inclusion of templates in the final plan was in response to requests made by several members of the public at the council's June 2004 meeting.

The efficiency with which public inquiries or complaints regarding the activities of the board, commission, or agency filed with it, with the department to which a board or commission is administratively assigned, or with the office of victims' rights or the office of the ombudsman have been processed and resolved.

Nothing came to our attention in this area.

The extent to which a board or commission that regulates entry into an occupation or profession has presented qualified applicants to serve the public.

Since the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council does not regulate any occupations or professions, this criterion is not applicable.

¹² The draft plan was distributed to Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium employees, Community-based Suicide Prevention Program grantees, drug and alcohol programs, community mental health centers, mayors and the State Library.

The extent to which state personnel practices, including affirmative action requirements, have been complied with by the board, commission, or agency to its own activities and the area of activity or interest.

Nothing in our review of the council indicated there were any complaints involving SSPC personnel practices.

The extent to which statutory, regulatory, budgeting, or other changes are necessary to enable the agency, board, or commission to better serve the interest of the public and to comply with the factors enumerated in AS 44.66.050.

As discussed in Report Conclusions, we recommend the council be continued. However, as reflected in Recommendation No. 1, we also suggest the council and DBH's CBSPP coordinator work together to ensure the community-based suicide prevention plans are consistent with the statewide suicide prevention plan.

As discussed in Recommendation No. 2, the department must improve its procedures for reporting financial information to the council. While not necessarily consistent with the legislation that established the council, DHSS has taken on a much larger role in the administration of SSPC. In such a role, with a council drawn in large part from the general citizenry, it is incumbent on the department to effectively communicate basic information to SSPC.

Failing that, we suggest the legislature consider making SSPC a separate appropriation item in DHSS, to limit the ability of the department's Finance and Management Services to legally reallocate and transfer funding between budgetary allocations and categories.

December 23, 2004

Ms. Pat Davidson
Legislative Auditor
Legislative Audit Division
P.O. Box 113300
Juneau, AK 99811-3300

Dear Ms. Davidson:

This letter is in response to your agency's November 15, 2004 Preliminary Report regarding a sunset review of the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council.

Recommendation No. 4

The Office of the Governor should make appointments to the council in a timely manner.

The Office of the Governor concurs with this recommendation.

Sincerely,

Linda J. Perez
Administrative Director

cc: Jim Griffin, Audit Manager
Laraine Derr, Director Boards & Commissions

December 27, 2004

Pat Davidson
Legislative Auditor
Division of Legislative Audit
P.O. 113300
Juneau, AK 99811-3300

RE: Sunset Review Preliminary Audit
Department of Health & Social Services
Statewide Suicide Prevention Council

Dear Ms. Davidson:

Thank you for allowing my staff and me the opportunity to respond to your recommendations.

Recommendation No. 1

The Division of Behavioral Health (DBH) Community-based Suicide Prevention Program Coordinator should ensure prevention programs conform to the Statewide Suicide Prevention Plan.

The Department of Health and Social Services concurs with this recommendation. The Division of Behavioral Health (DBH) agrees that the community-based suicide grants should be consistent with the Statewide Suicide Prevention Plan. The Division will continue to work with successful grantees to ensure that the Statewide Plan and the local plans are aligned.

In addition, due to upcoming changes in staff, the Division of Behavioral Health will take the opportunity to reconstruct the Prevention and Early Intervention Section, specifically

Community-based Suicide Prevention grants and activities. The Division also concurs that regular communication directly with the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council regarding community-based efforts and the links to the Statewide Plan will provide a more cohesive prevention system.

Recommendation No. 2

The Administrative Manager for DHSS Boards and Commissions and staff to the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council should develop a more formalized, informative system of reporting financial information to the council.

The DHSS in part disagrees with this conclusion. However, DHSS does acknowledge that during the time there was no Suicide Prevention Coordinator nor were there any personnel “acting” in that capacity, it was difficult for the Department to pass on information to the Council itself. Steps will be taken to remedy that situation when there is no SPC Coordinator or personnel “Acting” in place. The DHSS Administrative Manager will send financial information directly to Council President when there is no Coordinator or there is no personnel “Acting” in that capacity.

It should be noted that DHSS Administrative Manager did send monthly downloaded financial information as well as emailed financial information to staff (when requested) that were in “Acting” status. During conversations with the Legislative Auditor, the DHSS Administrative Manager informed the Auditor it was not possible to recreate the old monthly financial sheets as each time the download is performed it deletes the old information.

The DHSS does not believe that the Council was hindered by inadequate administrative support. The DHSS Administrative Manager supports five other Boards and Commissions in addition to other department staff. The DHSS Administrative Manager did ask the “Acting” coordinator monthly if she knew how the Council planned to expend its funds and made them aware of the balances. The “Acting” Coordinator always checked in with the Council and made the Administrative Manager aware of the Council's plans and these amounts were projected. It is the Council's decision on how to spend or not to spend funds. The DHSS fulfilled its obligations by informing on expenditure and unobligated balances monthly.

The DHSS did spend a portion of the funds on a department-wide project at the end of the fiscal year (June, 2004) when it was clear the Council was not going to spend these funds and that they would lapse. The Suicide Prevention Council was going to lapse over \$130,000. The department had costs associated with department-wide information technology integration. This integration related to the Suicide Prevention Council as the Information Technology group supports this council. It was a department decision to use some of the funds rather than have them lapse.

Recommendation No. 3

The Council should ensure it provides public notice of all council meetings.

The Department of Health and Social Services concurs with this recommendation. The Council should ensure that all meetings are publicly noticed and that the method is consistent and provides an opportunity for public comment. The Council should also post its meeting schedule on its website.

Recommendation No. 4

The Office of the Governor should make appointments to the council in a timely manner.

The Department of Health and Social Services concurs with this recommendation and will work closely with the Office of the Governor to ensure the Council is fully appointed and that appointments are made in a timely manner.

Report Conclusions

The Department of Health and Social Services does not agree with the conclusion that department hindered the efforts of the Council by providing inadequate financial information and diverting funds.

The facts are clear on the matter:

1. Monthly reports were routinely sent to the council coordinator and ad hoc information was provided upon request.
2. Funds were not spent on other activities until it was clear that the Council would not use their entire budget (in fact, the Council lapsed \$105,000 in FY04 as it was).
3. The acting Coordinator was mistaken in stating that the Director of Administrative Services instructed her not to spend further funds on Council operations. There is no evidence of this communication and the statement is not true or even credible.

The Department is concerned about the recommendation to extend the termination of the Suicide Prevention Council. The Department feels the Council should adopt specific outcome measures to reduce the suicide rate in Alaska. The Department believes the focus should be on implementing prevention efforts that work to reduce suicide and not solely on the existence of the Council. The Department has had a consistent message to consolidate or merge boards and council activity to become more efficient and believes that the continuation of the Council should be measured by the progress in reducing suicides in Alaska.

Ms. Pat Davidson
Legislative Auditor
1/5/2005
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In addition, the department is concerned that the work of the Council be aligned with other statewide efforts focusing on enhanced efficiencies, integration of clinical practices and consolidation of administrative functions. The department would like to recommend that the Council continue to be an active participant of the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority facilitated Governor's Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse and Alaska Mental Health Board staff merger planning and implementation process, ensuring that the statewide infrastructure for suicide prevention and education is integrated throughout our community-based system of care, ultimately ensuring that suicide efforts are sustained and embedded within the system well beyond 2009.

The work of the Council should interface closely with community plans around prevention and the Council should remain actively engaged with the Trust and the four planning boards making sure that beneficiaries receive the services they need.

Sincerely,

Joel Gilbertson
Commissioner

December 21, 2004

Legislative Budget and Audit Committee
Division of Legislative Audit
P.O. Box 113300
Juneau, Alaska 99811-3300

Dear Ms. Davidson

RE: Response to the Preliminary Audit Report
Statewide Suicide Prevention Council

As Chair of the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council, I would like to express my appreciation for the role in which the audit plays in helping out council with direction and accountability. In general, I found the audit to be supportive, accurate, and helpful.

The following will address the report's conclusions and recommendations:

Termination Date Extended:

I am very grateful for the audit's recommendation that the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council have an extended termination date from June 2005 to June 2009. Sustained efforts in reducing suicide in Alaska must be maintained if there is to be a reduction in the rate of suicide.

Funds:

I completely concur with the audit's findings in this matter. How is it that the legislature can budget a council with \$200,000 to carry out its work, and in the end, had limited knowledge and access to only \$34,700? Furthermore, when the acting coordinator - who was a state employee - inquired about funds and having access to the funds, she was sanctioned. I believe she was reprimanded for sending an email to Council members that the Commissioner thought contained erroneous information. Personally, I made several phone calls to the Commissioner and the Governor's office to resolve this issue. Eventually, I met with the Commissioner to advocate for the council and for the acting coordinator. After meeting with the Commissioner, a compromise was made allowing the acting coordinator to stay on the Council, but a new coordinator was immediately asked to step in. The new 2004 coordinator - also a state employee - has done an outstanding job. However, the whole experience left me disillusioned. Where was the council's money and why couldn't we have access to it? Why was it so difficult to have a current budget presented quarterly to the Council? As a volunteer appointed to the Council and a member of the general public who is unfamiliar with governmental financial procedure, I am dependent upon the coordinator to have full access and

knowledge of the Council's budget. However when the past acting coordinator did inquire, she was dealt with in a manner I found extreme and unjust. How ironic that this audit determined that \$31,700 went to furniture during this state fiscal year.

Recommendation No. 1:

The suggestion to have community based suicide prevention programs conform to the statewide suicide prevention plan makes good sense and will ensure that the work of the Council and the department is aligned. The plan was written for all communities within Alaska and is a living document that is meant to be updated with current research and data. As community based programs go through the DBH grant application process, their knowledge, feedback, and recommendations regarding the plan will be invaluable. The statewide suicide prevention plan is general enough that communities can conform to the plan, yet be very distinct within their own community. The plan was not written with a specific prescription for every community. Rather it provides guidelines, data and suggestions for a community to create their plan. Our hope is that the plan empowers communities to create a plan that is relevant, meaningful, and culturally appropriate.

Specifically, the Council can assist the DBH Community-based Suicide Prevention Program coordinator in creating the criteria in the grant application process, as well as in the grant review process. This would be done in accordance with the normal grant process.

Recommendation No. 2:

The solution for a more formalized, informative system of knowing the council's budget is excellent. Furthermore, the council would like to know all expenditures and a balance of our budget on a quarterly basis. Perhaps the DHSS Financial and Management Services (FMS) staff should have a time on the quarterly agenda to review the budget, personally reporting the Council's expenditures to date and fielding questions from the Council members. If not, the Council feels that it is necessary that the coordinator automatically receive monthly and quarterly reports from FMS; be able to inquire about expenses that don't make sense, or seem inappropriate, all without fear of reprisal.

If the council is indeed permitted to continue until June of 2009, perhaps a review of the FY05 - FY09 budgets to ensure an increased adjustment that will allow the Council to adequately perform its duties and activities including hiring a full-time coordinator, (if the decision is made to do so) would be appropriate.

Recommendation No.3:

The finding that two out of twelve meetings were not given adequate notice is so noted, and the council will make certain that such notices are given 100% of the time. The audit's suggestions for greater publicity and receiving public comment will be done by consistently publishing meetings in the local papers and on the SSPC website. Furthermore, as the four annual meeting dates are established (ideally, at the beginning of the calendar year) they will be published on the SSPC website.

Recommendation No. 4:

The recommendation to have the Office of the Governor make timely appointments to the council is very much appreciated. It was difficult to hold council meetings when a quorum was impossible due to unfilled appointments. Keeping the momentum of a functioning Council is crucial to make progress in suicide prevention.

Additionally, I would like to point out that the legislation that created the Council also requires four legislators to serve on the Council. Specifically, the legislation appoints the Senate President and the Speaker of the House, as well as a member from the House and the Senate. When the Council was initially created, all four legislators regularly attended. However, it has become clear with the legislator's busy schedule it is difficult for them to make the meetings. I would like to recommend a change in statute whereby either the President of the Senate or the Speaker of the House can appoint two members from the Senate and the House to serve on the council. By having consistent attendance from all Council members we will sustain a functioning Council.

In conclusion, it has been an honor to serve on the Council. This audit has helped, at least in part, to restore my faith in the checks and balances of government. It is my sincere hope that by working together we can reduce the tragedy of suicide in Alaska.

Please contact me if you need further information.

Sincerely,

Jeanine B. Sparks, Chair
Statewide Suicide Prevention Council
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