

# WATERLOO REGION SUICIDE PREVENTION COUNCIL

Suicide Information and Awareness is Important – You're not Alone

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Waterloo Region Suicide Prevention Council

## Protective Factors and Suicide: Cultural Renewal and Community Development in a First Nations Community

*Karl Torbicki*

In February 2006, 18 university students travelled to a First Nations community to learn about life in an isolated Northern reserve and to volunteer with youth in the local school. The students had an opportunity to examine some of the risk and protective factors affecting the community in terms of death by suicide. The following is an introduction to the problem of suicide among Aboriginal youth.

In 2000, suicide was the leading cause of death for Aboriginal youth and young adults (aged 10-44 years),

accounting for 38% of deaths. Young Aboriginal males are at a 5 fold greater risk of death by suicide, and female Aboriginal youth are at 7.5 times greater risk compared to their Canadian counterparts. This increased risk of death by suicide is thought to be due to the fact that Aboriginal youth face many more risk factors for suicide than the average Canadian. Risk factors such as social isolation, substance and alcohol abuse, unemployment, lack of personal purpose, access to firearms and negative living conditions are the realities of life in remote Native communities. Family instability and histories of substance abuse, violence, depression and death by suicide are the legacy of the residential schools' impact on Aboriginal parents.

Living conditions are extremely poor in many Northern reserves. Housing conditions are a major issue, with multi-generation families of up to 20 people sharing a single home. In many communities, safe drinking water must be purchased and brought home by snowmobile. Nutrition is poor due to the cost of flying in fresh produce. There are few jobs or

opportunities for youth in such remote, isolated communities.

The most common mental health disorders associated with 80-100% of suicides are major depression and substance abuse, two risk factors particularly relevant to reserve life. Solvent abuse is a problem among the youth of this community and there are many initiatives in place to address this problem. The school hallways are lined with posters drawn by students advocating the dangers of gas sniffing and solvent abuse. The "gas patrol", a dedicated group of community leaders, tour the community at night looking for youth sniffing gas and then walk them home in order to prevent further harm or freezing to death in the cold. Alcohol abuse is similarly a significant problem here, despite the fact that it is a dry reserve. Alcohol is smuggled into the community along the  
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ice road in the winter and every vehicle entering the community is searched. Police officers and peacekeepers burn the confiscated alcohol and patrol the reserve at night to apprehend intoxicated individuals and impound them in order to prevent them from freezing or harming others. Despite such harm reduction measures, there is little counselling available for victims of alcoholism in isolated Northern communities. Confidentiality issues in such close-knit settings make people reluctant to seek what help is available. Recent telehealth developments allow for confidential counselling with remote therapists, which could reduce negative attitudes towards seeking help. Nurses noted that patients were more comfortable talking to a physician or psychiatrist through the telehealth equipment (a TV set and mounted camera) than talking face to face.

The community is building upon factors known to protect against death by suicide, particularly cultural enhancement. Cultural enhancement is the preservation and reclamation of traditional skills, history, art, language, ceremonies, healing and religious practices. Researchers have identified six protective factors indicative of “cultural continuity”: self-government, education services, police and fire services, health services, cultural facilities and land

claims. Aboriginal communities with some form of self-government were found to have the lowest rates of death by suicide. This community is largely self-governed by an elected chief and council, but was placed under third party management by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. Financial control of the band’s funds was transferred to an outside agent based in Southern Ontario. This transfer of control can be a demoralizing blow to a community’s autonomy and self-government.

The community has a high language retention rate as well as a high school on the reserve – two cultural enhancement factors. Aboriginal language and culture classes are taught each day by Aboriginal paraprofessionals in the school. High school teachers incorporate traditional culture into the Ontario curriculum. For example, high school students attend an Aboriginal leadership class that includes traditional medicine wheel teachings (mental, spiritual, physical and emotional aspects of health coming into balance) and explains the significance of traditional art and symbols. Specific culture classes teach students other traditional skills, and the high school also has a wood shop where students learn how to construct bed frames, sled runners and other relevant objects.

Recently, the community held a pow-wow, the first in the

community in years. The topics of suicide awareness and prevention and grieving after bereavement by suicide were addressed in the program, alongside traditional dance, music and celebration to engage the community. This is an indication of the cultural renewal that is taking place here. Such efforts for cultural enhancement serve to provide youth with a feeling of belonging, stronger cultural identity and a sense of security in their community. Pride in heritage and traditions and self-recognition as belonging to a distinct culture can act as a buffer against the risk factors of loss of cultural values and traditional beliefs and marginalization of Aboriginal culture by some outsiders. Despite the powerful initiatives, the community faces significant challenges. Youth are inundated with images of the idealized Western lifestyle through widespread use of satellite TV and videogames.

The increased rate of death by suicide among Aboriginal youth deserves greater attention and is deeply concerning. Please consult the following references to learn more.

**References:**

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Special thanks to Region of Waterloo Public Health for their support in the printing and distribution of this newsletter.

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## WRSPC TAKES ITS MESSAGE TO THE INTERNET!

*Cathy McDonald-Reis*

We are pleased to announce that we officially own the address **[www.wrspc.ca](http://www.wrspc.ca)**! The Waterloo Region Suicide Prevention Council continues to grow and achieve its goals. We have hosted two successful annual conferences, created a Speakers' Bureau with an outreach presentation on suicide prevention, developed another **WHY?** brochure in our

series, held three community events for the September 10, 2005 World Suicide Prevention Day...the list could go on and on! One of our goals for 2006 is to bring our messages about suicide and suicide prevention to the Internet through our own web site. We went on the hunt in the fall of 2005 to find a creative person who could not only guide us on how to begin, but also to assist us with the physical setup and ongoing maintenance of this project. Darcy Davis of D. Davis Images and Design ([www.darcydavis.com](http://www.darcydavis.com)) came to our rescue with more ambitious goals for timing that we had ever dreamt! After several weeks, we officially set up [www.wrspc.ca](http://www.wrspc.ca). Our logo is proudly displayed and we are gathering countless pieces of valuable information to include. Darcy has made a very frightening process appear seamless. He continues to "wow" us with his ideas and mock trials of what our site will look like.

The site will include links to all our current and future outreach brochures as well as newsletters (both current and past versions) which can be downloaded. It will include the most up to date statistics available to us about suicide. There will be a place to learn about our upcoming conference (which will be held in September of this year) and links to other sites that provide information and education about suicide prevention and mental health issues. We have

also partnered with the Waterloo Region Suicide Prevention Strategy Planning Group and will include a downloadable version of the recently completed suicide prevention strategy for Waterloo Region on our site.

The Waterloo Region Suicide Prevention Council and the web site do not provide crisis services. However, the web site will include a link to resources in order to access crisis services in your area. All material provided on our web site is intended for informational and educational purposes only. This information is not meant as a substitute for qualified professional advice. We recommend that you seek health information or crisis services from a health care provider, crisis service or your local hospital.

We look forward to continuing our work with Darcy in hope that our site can be up and fully functioning by Spring 2006. Until then, while you are surfing on the net, go to [www.wrspc.ca](http://www.wrspc.ca), and bookmark us!!!

### **Waterloo Region Suicide Prevention Newsletter**

is published for the prevention of suicide through education, networking and resources.

Waterloo Region Suicide Prevention Council

c/o Canadian Mental Health Association

67 King St. E.

Kitchener ON N2G 2K4

519-744-7645 Ext. 310

## WHY?? SUICIDE AND THE OLDER ADULT RESOURCE

The Waterloo Region Suicide Prevention Council has developed a new pamphlet that deals with the subject of suicide among older adults. Statistics show that elderly people, especially males, have suicide rates that are higher than those among teens and among the population as a whole.

Increasing age, living alone and increasing health problems are some of the risk factors for suicide among older persons.

**“WHY?? Suicide and the Older Adult”** outlines risk factors and warning signs, and offers information on helping yourself or others. As well, the pamphlet has a list of telephone numbers and websites that people can use in order to get help or to learn more about this issue. The pamphlets will be distributed to physicians, senior centres and nursing homes though out the Region.

For more information, or to request a pamphlet, please call 519-744-7645 Ext.310 and leave a message.



We would like to welcome  
Dr. Johan Reis  
To the Waterloo Region  
Suicide Prevention Council

## CREATION OF A REGION WIDE SUICIDE PREVENTION STRATEGY

*Linda Bender*

The Waterloo Region Suicide Prevention Planning Group was formed in response to the recommendations of the 2002 Coroner's inquest. This group is a broad-based partnership of human service organizations in our region. Organizations involved were: Cambridge Memorial Hospital, Canadian Mental Health Association-Waterloo Regional Branch, Catholic Family Counselling Centre, Community Care Access Centre of Waterloo Region, Conestoga College, Grand River Hospital, Lutherwood, Mental Health and Wellness Network, Regional Municipality of Waterloo (including Public Health), St. Mary's General Hospital, University of Waterloo, Waterloo Catholic District School Board, Waterloo Region District School Board, Waterloo Region Suicide Prevention Council, Waterloo Regional Homes for Mental Health, Waterloo Regional Police, and Wilfrid Laurier University.

Coming together over a period of 6 months, the group completed the following tasks:

- developed Terms of Reference
- adopted Guiding Principles
- developed an outline of mental health services in Waterloo Region as

background/context for the strategy

- developed the Waterloo Region Suicide Prevention Strategy.

The strategy consists of five goals, and the steps to work towards each goal:

1. Commitment: To increase community commitment to participation in a regional suicide prevention strategy.
2. Public Awareness: To increase awareness that suicide is a significant health problem in our community and that it is preventable through community action.
3. Prevention: To work together/collaborate to increase community capacity to identify and assist people in all aspects of suicide prevention.
4. Training and Education: To increase the capacity of the community to respond to the risk factors of suicide.
5. Advocacy: To influence community change to implement a coordinated suicide strategy.

Overall, the aim of the strategy is to address all levels of suicide prevention activities:

- Promotion: actions aimed at promoting general awareness.
- Prevention: actions with the goal of assisting individuals in pre-crisis situations, helping them steer away from a specific suicidal behaviour.
- Intervention: actions directed at individuals in crisis, helping them overcome the crisis or

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minimize its harm effects.

- Postvention: actions directed to individuals in post-crisis situations, helping them recover from the effects of suicidal behaviour in themselves or others they are associated with.

Next steps will see organizations identify which steps in the strategy may fit their mandate, skills and capabilities, and creating a plan for moving ahead on implementing the strategy in our community. It is very exciting to see community members take ownership and action towards making suicide prevention everybody's business!

## **UPCOMING EVENTS:**

### ***Good to Know...***

During Mental Health Week, the Waterloo Catholic District School Board's 5 high schools will be partnering with CAIP (Child and Adolescent Inpatient Psychiatric Unit) of Grand River Hospital. High school administrators, guidance staff and child and youth workers will learn about the CAIP team, the process for admission, day programming for students and how the two groups can work together to provide services to students with mental health issues who will be returning to school after a hospital admission. CAIP will be presenting two "lunch and learn" sessions at St. Mary's High School.

## **Mental Health Week**

**May 1–7, 2006**

***Take control of your health;***

***Take care of your mind***

is the national campaign slogan for Mental Health Week.

***“Take time to live, laugh, & play!”***

is how we describe the celebrations in Waterloo Region – free of charge. Everyone is welcome!

### **“THE GROOVY GIG”**

Performances of original poetry, songs, comedy and thoughts

Groovy snacks and cool ideas on taking time for fun  
Journal Writing Workshop  
Music making and games

**Wednesday, May 3, 2006**

**12:30 P.M. – 4:00 P.M.**

**Centre for Mental Health  
67 King Street East  
Kitchener, ON**

For more information call 519-744-7645 Ext. 333

### **“CAMBRIDGE COMES OUT TO PLAY”...**

Playful things to do, eat, drink & create

Live entertainment

Display of original community pictures created by your neighbours and friends

**Thursday, May 4, 2006**

**6:30 P.M. – 8:00 P.M.**

**Cambridge Centre for the Arts**

**David Durward Centre  
Cafeteria**

**45 Thorne Street, Cambridge**  
For more information call 519-740-7782

Building on last year's campaign theme ***Practise Mind and Body Fitness***, this year's goals include:

- enabling Canadians to sustain good mental health and mental fitness
- helping Canadians respond effectively to and manage, stressful events and situations in their lives.

Celebrating Mental Health Week can encourage people to:

- learn the characteristics of good mental health and find out how mentally healthy they are
- improve the way they respond to and manage positive and negative life events/situations (including change, illness – mental or physical, etc.).

Attending to our mental health has many dimensions:

- being mentally healthy leads to better overall enjoyment of life
- it is better to focus on changing what we can, and dealing more effectively with what we cannot change
- the way we manage stressful events/situations in our lives can impact our overall health (mental and physical).



*If you would like your name deleted from the Waterloo Region Suicide Prevention Council mailing list please leave a message at 519-744-7645 Ext. 310.*

**The WATERLOO REGION  
SUICIDE PREVENTION  
COUNCIL Presents:**

**Free Community Forum –  
From Survivor Grieving to  
Survivor Giving**

Thursday, September 14, 2006  
5:30 P.M.

The Sunshine Centre Luther  
Village on the Park  
141 Father David Bauer Drive  
Waterloo ON

**Guest Speaker: Bonnie  
Ball**

**Dimensions of Suicide  
Third Annual  
Conference**

**Understanding and Hope**

Friday, September 15, 2006  
The Sunshine Centre Luther  
Village on the Park  
141 Father David Bauer Dr.  
Waterloo ON

**Presenters:**

Dr. Antoon A. Leenaars  
Suicide: A Multidimensional  
Malaise

Bonnie Ball  
The Canadian Perspective of  
Suicide

Kathy Payette/Wayne Hobbs  
Our Hopes – Our Strategy

For further information  
contact:  
Kathy Payette 519-884-1470  
Ext.153

**CANADIAN  
ASSOCIATION FOR  
SUICIDE PREVENTION  
(CASP) Conference 2006**

Complexity of Suicide:  
Prevention, Intervention and  
Aftermath

October 25 – 27, 2006

University of Toronto  
Conference Centre  
90 Chestnut St. Toronto ON

For more information, go to  
[www.suicideprevention.ca](http://www.suicideprevention.ca).

**WE NEED YOUR SUPPORT.  
YOUR DONATIONS ARE  
NEEDED!  
SUPPORT THE WORK OF  
THE WRSPC  
BOTH INDIVIDUAL AND  
ORGANIZATIONAL  
DONATIONS ARE  
WELCOME.  
PLEASE FORWARD YOUR  
DONATION TO:**

**Waterloo Region Suicide  
Prevention Council  
c/o Canadian Mental Health  
Association  
67 King Street East  
Kitchener ON N2G 2K4**

**CANDLES**

Please help support the  
Waterloo Region Suicide  
Prevention Council by  
purchasing beautiful candles  
for your enjoyment. A set of  
3-6” pillars on a glass plate in

four different scents for only  
**\$15.00.** To order, call 519-  
744-7645 Ext. 310 and leave a  
message.

**RESOURCES  
AVAILABLE  
THROUGH WRSPC**

**Waterloo Region Suicide  
Prevention Council Brochure**

**WHY?? Suicide Information  
Brochure**

**WHY?? Youth Suicide  
Brochure**

**WHY?? Suicide in the Older  
Adult Brochure**

**Suicide Risk Assessment and  
Intervention for Caregivers  
Booklet**

**Waterloo Region Suicide  
Prevention Council  
Newsletter published twice  
yearly**

**Suicide bookmark (available  
until supplies run out)**

