HOPE AND RESILIENCE

SUICIDE PREVENTION IN THE ARCTIC

NOVEMBER 7–8, 2009

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
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The main focus of the seminar was to emphasize the importance of strengthening the resilience perspective and focus on hope instead of hopelessness in the prevention of suicide in the Arctic. Hope and resilience were consistent themes throughout the seminar and their meaning and importance was presented from different angles. Presentations included good examples at the policy level, strategic level, and practical level, as well as presentations by youth which showed hope for the future work in prevention of suicide in the Arctic.

The report is structured according to the different sections in the seminar. Section I states the background of the seminar followed by Section II dedicated to the understanding of the problem. Section III deals with best practices in suicide prevention based on presentations in workshop 1 and 3. Section IV looks at research and documentation and includes the presentations made in workshop 2. Section V sums up the youth perspective with presentations made in workshop 4 – the youth seminar. Section VI contains the complete lists of recommendations from the four workshops followed by the panel discussion between youth representatives, politicians and policy makers across the Arctic in Section VII. At the end of the report suggestions are given for further reading and a list of participants, programs and the participating organizations are provided as appendix.

Henning Herrestad opened the seminar with a comprehensive philosophical view of the concept and meaning of hope, suggesting that hope might be the cure if hopelessness is the problem. William Hogan zoomed in from the concept of hope to community prevention strategies from a policy maker’s perspective. He gave an insight on how evidenced based information has directed the planning process for strategies in suicide prevention in Alaska. Patricia Wiebe, Loee Okalik and Tina Price provided an overview of the Canadian suicide prevention strategies, presenting the background and contents of a holistic approach to suicide prevention based on Inuit mental wellness priorities and Inuit culture and circumstances. The goal is to restore the general well-being of Inuit through coherent integrated programs and services for Inuit in Canada. In general speakers underlined that successful suicide prevention strategies require approaches that are community-based, strengths-based and focused on Inuit autonomy and control as well as community action.

Jack Hicks provided an important overview of data on Inuit suicide in transition across the Arctic and reflections on recent research. The data presented by both Birger Poppel and Jack Hicks underlined the relative differences in suicidal behavior across gender, age, region and time. Both Jack Hicks and William Hogan emphasized the importance on acting on what we know. Psychological autopsy studies from Alaska and Canada have brought new knowledge and indicate that the elevated rates in suicide are socially determined. The studies generate a rich and detailed dataset on the determinants of suicide behavior and will provide a good picture of why people actually die by suicide.

The People Awaken Study presented by Jim Allen showed us an example of partnership between researchers and communities where an important objective is to give back to the
community. A lesson learned is the importance of basing the intervention and its activities not only on the cultural level, but on the individual and local community level as well.

A consistent theme at the seminar was the need to address the layers of grief work and trauma related to multiple historical and vicarious trauma. Iva GreyWolf stressed that people should be trained in basic intervention skills in order to be able to confront, talk, listen and act upon suicidal behavior. The need for local solutions to local challenges was emphasized by several speakers at the seminar.

At the youth seminar presentations were made by the delegates from each country as to the specific challenges in preventing suicide in their home region as well as current prevention strategies and programs already in place. Several interesting youth projects were presented. The Project Embrace Life in Nunavut provided a good example of how to organize and coordinate preventive initiatives. A general characteristic of intervention projects involving the youth was a focus on well-being and empowerment of young people giving them tools to express themselves. Examples of good practice and prevention initiatives were the youth to youth mentor project Sapiik, the Inuusivut project, Digital storytelling and Team Grizzly.

The seminar was concluded by a panel discussion between youth representatives and policy makers. In this dialogue the gender paradox in suicide patterns was the most discussed subject leading to a conclusion of the need for more research addressing the gender differences in Inuit communities in order to target interventions and youth policy accordingly.

Based on the knowledge provided through the presentations and discussions at the seminar it was evident that we need to address the social problems and challenges through comprehensive strategies. This includes alcohol, sexual abuse of children, rape, violence, substance abuse, etc. This was obvious from watching the various documentaries produced by our youth representatives.

The shared experiences at the seminar showed the importance of a general holistic approach to prevention that is specific to Inuit, Sámi, and other indigenous peoples and focus on well-being. The initiatives must build on existing knowledge, and should be carried out in partnership with the community and acknowledge the important role of all generations. Overall participants stressed the need for improving socioeconomic conditions in the Arctic in order to increase the general well-being among Inuit – especially for children and youth. This includes better access to education and knowledge as well as professional help and empowering activities. The focus is not new but still needs attention and should be an objective in research, in policy making, in health promoting programs and intervention.

Recommendations were made by each of the four workshops and presented on the second day at the seminar in plenum. General recommendations can be read below and a complete list of recommendations from workshops can be found in Section VI.
GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE SEMINAR

The following recommendations were generated by participants in the four workshops during the seminar. Participants represented youth, researchers, practitioners and policy makers involved in the field of suicide prevention.

Youth empowerment and involvement
• Focus on well-being and make resources available to promote healthy living among the youth in the Arctic by a general improvement of the socioeconomic conditions in the circumpolar regions.
• Improve self-esteem among youth through empowering activities.
• Promote youth initiatives and involvement - Increase the participation of youth in policy decisions that affect them with more invitations to conferences, seminars, and workshops.
• Create and extend opportunities for youth to express themselves creatively and artistically through youth clubs, programs and education.
• Train youth mentors and create mentor networks and programs.
• Support the coordination and cooperation of youth organizations across the Arctic.
• Meet the youth at their own level and target prevention towards their environment.

Research and documentation
• Promote solution focused research – research that gives back to communities and participants.
• There is a need for documentation of programs and what is being done to prevent suicide and promote wellness throughout the Arctic at all levels:
  o Descriptive and formative evaluation with focus on process rather than outcome.
  o Research on policy.
  o Comparative research on differing cross national and Arctic approaches to social policies.

Local and professional partnerships
• Prevention and intervention should be in strong partnership with the communities and in respect of local cultural values as well as community readiness.
• Improve coordination of initiatives and partnership between researcher, policy makers and practitioners as well as cross disciplinary collaboration.

Comprehensive prevention
• A comprehensive approach in suicide prevention programs is pervasive and should combine the concepts of prevention, intervention and postvention.
• Reduce the prevalence of substance abuse, violence and sexual abuse and provide more treatment opportunities.
• Establish centralized crisis networks that are easily accessible and visibly available to youth to raise awareness of the existing resources out there.
• Involve parents and elders with resources and provide them with skills to activate them in suicide prevention initiatives.
• Improve parenting skills through parental education.
• Encourage openness and strengthen people’s ability to address problems related to suicide.