

LIVE TO RIDE. CALL TO LIVE.

Story and Photos
by Beth Ipsen, PIO

The Fight to Prevent Suicide in Alaska Follows the World's Longest Toughest Snowmobile Race

Darrell Hildebrand knows all too well how suicide affects a family. When the Alaska Wildlife Trooper was 4-years old, his father committed suicide, leaving Hildebrand and his five siblings fatherless. Since then, there have been other suicides in his large family, leaving other relatives without a parent, sibling, spouse or a child. Funerals for those who have died at their own hands are something that is all too common in Rural Alaska.

"When there is a suicide, everybody places that person on a pedestal. What message are we sending to our young people?" Hildebrand said. "It's not okay. That person that committed suicide stole from us."

He was speaking to a group of people at a community center in Tanana on Saturday, Feb. 26. It was the last village visit by Hildebrand and fellow Alaska Wildlife Trooper Jon Simeon to talk about the effects suicide has inflicted on their families and others. The two joined with Sarana Schell from the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) for a tour coinciding with the over 2,000-mile Iron Dog to talk about suicide prevention. The joint campaign between the Department of Public Safety, DHSS and the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council (SSPC) included visits to McGrath, Galena, Kaltag and Hildebrand's hometown, Nulato, throughout the week. The group concluded their efforts in Tanana on Saturday. That's where they met up with Tanana resident, Cynthia Erickson, who got the ball rolling for the tour. In the aftermath of six suicides in the region last fall, Erickson feared that suicide was becoming too normal in the Interior



Helen Peters thanks Alaska Wildlife Troopers Jon Simeon and Darrell Hildebrand for talking about suicide to people in Tanana.

Yukon River villages. In frustration, she typed up a chain email that went viral. She got a response from people all over the U.S. who had either lost loved ones to suicide or had contemplated taking their lives in difficult times. She then took it one step further and called Schell and pitched her idea to get the message out to villages along the Iron Dog route. Erickson, a long-time Iron Dog volunteer, recruited returning race winners, Tyler Huntington and Chris Olds, for what became the "Live to Ride. Call to Live" campaign. Huntington, who grew up in Galena, has had family and friends take their own lives. The Statewide Suicide Prevention Council printed posters, baseball-type cards with photos of Huntington and Olds and suicide prevention

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Alaska Wildlife Trooper Jon Simeon and Cynthia Erickson walk through Tanana after a meeting at the community center.

information such as reflective stickers listing the CARELINE hotline number 877-266-HELP. DHSS, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, Iron Dog and the Alaska Brain Injury Network contributed funds for the reflective stickers. Erickson also contacted DPS Commissioner Joseph Masters, asking for Alaska Natives in uniform to help deliver the message to many of the villages that had a rash of suicides last fall.

Schell, Hildebrand and Simeon flew on the trooper-striped King Air airplane and gave talks in schools and community centers along the Iron Dog route – telling people that most of all, suicide is 100 percent preventable.

Schell said Alaska's suicide rate has not changed in the decade since the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council was established in response to what was characterized then as an ongoing "epidemic" of suicide. Young people continue to be the hardest hit group. What has changed is that our understanding of suicide has grown over those years, she said, and communities have become more willing to use that improved understanding to address the problem.

"Not talking about it is not helping," Schell said.

The travelers worked to change this by speaking in front of groups of school children and adults at public meetings to give people hope where it is

Alaska Wildlife Troopers Darrell Hildebrand and Jon Simeon watch as Iron Dog participants leave Tanana.

lacking, to shed light on the darkness that is the despair of depression, family violence and drug and alcohol abuse. For Hildebrand and Simeon, their stories of their troubles were personal.

Simeon was touched by suicide growing up as a boy in Aniak. His best friend committed suicide in 1987 on a day they were to go hunting. His friend had talked to him the night before, and in hindsight, there were signs his friend was troubled. But Simeon told his friend to go to bed and he'd see him in the morning for their hunting trip. It's something he now regrets.

"I didn't see the signs, and I lost my best friend," Simeon said.

When he asked the crowd how many people had been touched by the suicide of a friend of family member, almost every one at the Tanana Community Center raised their hands.

Then Schell stepped in and talked about tools available to prevent suicides. More and more schools and communities around Alaska are offering trainings that teach people to recognize the signs Simeon missed, and how to connect someone who is hurting with help.



Alaska Wildlife Troopers Jon Simeon, Col. Gary Folger, pilot John Chiri and Darrell Hildebrand admire the snowmachines participating in the Iron Dog.

She also gave out stickers and cards and posters featuring photos of Olds and Huntington and contact information for Alaska's suicide prevention hotline Careline 1-877-266-HELP (4357), carelinealaska.com or 907-2-LISTEN (547836). The bottom line of the campaign is that there is help available for people when life seems its bleakest and the despair seems overwhelming. If someone reaches out to you for help even if it's just to talk, don't turn them away. The signs that someone may be considering suicide are appearing depressed, withdrawing from family and friends, feeling hopeless, experiencing dramatic mood changes such as becoming suddenly happy or calm, losing interest in most activities and giving away prized possessions.



Hildebrand had a simple suggestion for helping youth before they get to the point of hopelessness.

“Tell your children you love them,” he said. “Put them on a pedestal when they’re alive.”

More information can be found on the [State-wide Suicide Prevention Council's](#) website. The site has a [page](#) with the materials featuring Olds and Huntington, who went on to win their second-consecutive Iron Dog.



Iron Dog contestants and two-time winners Tyler Huntington and Chris Olds wait for the count-down before leading the race out of Tanana on Saturday.



A crowd watches as another Iron Dog team leaves Tanana for the last day of the race.