

## Alabama trying to reduce suicide rate, which is above national average

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ANNISTON — Officials hope to reduce Alabama’s suicide rate, which is worse than the national average.

The Alabama Suicide Prevention and Resources Coalition is planning an advertising campaign for this summer to address the taboo against talking about suicide.

Debra Hodges, suicide prevention director for the Alabama Department of Public Health, told The Anniston Star in a story published Sunday the campaign will be funded with a \$1.47 million, three-year grant aimed at youth suicide prevention.

Suicide rates have climbed sharply across the country since the recession began, she said, and Alabama’s problem has been worse than average. Hodges said the state had about 13.4 suicides per 100,000 people in 2011, while the most recent national numbers had the overall American suicide rate at 12.4 per 100,000 people.

Hodges said guns account for about 70 percent of all suicides in Alabama. Nationally, about 50 percent of all suicides involve firearms.

Ten years ago, just a little more than 500 Alabamians took their own lives every year, but 640 Alabamians committed suicide in 2011. That rise outpaces the overall growth in the population, state officials said.

Health experts said the nation’s economic troubles are to blame for the sudden jump in suicide after 2008, but they are mystified about the steady rise that was going on before the financial crash. Mental health activists wonder why the state doesn’t spend more on the one thing that’s proven to help — mental health care.

“Depression is a very treatable disease,” said Lisa Dunn, of the Alabama branch of the American Society for Suicide Prevention. “That treatment should be available to more people.”

Alabama’s mental health agency has seen its funding drop from about \$136 million in 2009 to just over \$100 million this year.

Funding from earmarked sources and federal money has softened that blow, making the real impact only a few percent of the department’s total revenue. Still, the department last year announced plans to lay off 948 employees and close two hospitals.

Hodges and Dunn both said programs like the advertising campaign can have a positive effect beyond their young target audience. But they acknowledge that older men aren’t necessarily reached, and statistics show that is the group most at risk for suicide.

“Suicide rates are much higher among white males than any other group, particularly for men over 65,” Hodges said.