

Deseret Morning News, Tuesday, November 15, 2005

Anti-suicide program offers help to youths

By [Elaine Jarvik](#)

Deseret Morning News

It was grim and redundant proof: Just as Greg Hudnall was heading up to the podium Monday to speak at a press conference on suicide, he got a phone call that another teenager had killed herself, this time in Moab.

Although the rate of suicide has declined in recent years, it's still much higher in the Intermountain area than in the nation as a whole. In Utah, 13.74 suicides are committed per 100,000 people each year compared to a 10.66 rate nationally, while the suicide rate in Utah for young males is the highest in the nation at 22 per 100,000 population, according to the state Department of Health.

Of course, for each family who loses a young person to suicide, none of the statistics matter, anyway.

That's why a ballroom full of Utahns, including the governor's wife and the attorney general, gathered at the Grand America Hotel to help welcome a new youth-suicide prevention program to the state. The program, the Jason Foundation, is headquartered in Tennessee.

The Jason Foundation joins ongoing efforts by NAMI Utah's Hope for Tomorrow program, the Provo School District's Hope Task Force, and other smaller organizations and parent support groups in the state.

"It's time we take the courage and the stand together and say, 'No more,' " said a choked-up Hudnall, executive director of the Hope Task Force and director of student services for the Provo School District.

Ten years ago, when Hudnall was principal of Independence High School, he got a phone call that changed the direction of his life — one of his students had been found in a nearby park, a victim of suicide.

Hudnall wasn't the only tearful speaker at Monday's press conference and a noontime banquet that followed. Attorney General Mark Shurtleff teared up as soon as he got to the podium, describing a "silent epidemic" that touched teenagers who felt their lives were "so sad, so

hopeless."

Jason Foundation founder and president Clark Flatt spoke about his son Jason, who killed himself in the summer of 1997. Flatt described his son as "a good all-around kid" and himself as a father who joined every organization he could in order to protect his children. He had no idea before that July day, he said, that suicide is ranked as the third-leading cause of death for youths 15 to 24.

"Truly, suicide is the Goliath of today's world, and we're the Davids," he said about parents and others who struggle to understand and stop it.

Flatt said he will not compete for funding with Utah suicide prevention and education groups and will work in tandem with them — although it was clear that several of those groups were a bit surprised when the attorney general first announced there would be a big luncheon for the Jason Foundation's arrival in Utah.

"We're not saying (the Jason Foundation) is a better program," Shurtleff said at the press conference. "The more we can get the word out, the better. . . . When it comes to saving our children, there's no stepping on toes."

The Jason Foundation will provide prevention training, for free, to Utah teens, parents and educators. It has the support of the American Football Coaches Association, gets funding from sponsors such as Wal-Mart, and runs a resource phone line (877-778-2275) staffed by Psychiatric Solutions hospitals, Flatt said.

Ninety percent of young people who commit suicide, said NAMI Utah director Sheri Wittwer, do so "because of a psychiatric diagnosis, but few are in treatment."

The stigma of asking for help is the barrier, she said.

"In a fleeting moment," said Utah first lady Mary Kaye Huntsman, "they think, 'I'd be better off dead.' " Family and friends need to "touch these kids' hearts, to lift them up and to listen," she said.

Eight out of 10 youths youths who kill themselves have told someone of their loneliness and pain, said Hope Task Force's Hudnall, but that someone else never told an adult who might have been able to help.

"We've got to break that barrier," he said.
