

'EVERYONE WAS IN THE LOOP'

Impeachment inquiry testimony ensnares secretary of state, national security adviser, C1

The Forum

OF FARGO-MOORHEAD



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David Samson / The Forum

Grace Poitra and her son, Joey, are seen in Lindenwood Park in south Fargo. Joey's father, Robbie Lass, died by suicide in the park in 2016.

BREAKING THE SILENCE

To raise awareness and inspire hope, The Forum is running a five-part series on the issue of suicide in the Fargo-Moorhead region and taking an in-depth look at some of the groups it's acutely affected.

- PART 1** Overview
- PART 2** Military veterans
- PART 3** LGBTQ community
- PART 4** Middle-aged white men
- PART 5** Native Americans

NATIVE YOUTH CRISIS HOTLINE
Native American youth in crisis can call 1-877-209-1266

Inspectors: Fargo VA understaffed ER nurses

Report also says some providers lacked sexual assault treatment training

By Patrick Springer
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FARGO — The Veterans Affairs Medical Center here sometimes lacked adequate nurse staffing in the emergency department during overnight shifts and did not always ensure that those counseling veterans for sexual trauma received required training, according to a report.

Those were among the findings of the Office of the Inspector General, which gave the medical center generally high marks following an unannounced inspection in March. The report was issued on Thursday, Nov. 7.

The inspection report, which described its findings as a snapshot of the north Fargo medical center's performance, is part of efforts to improve patient safety and quality of care. Inspectors noted deficiencies in four of eight clinical areas reviewed and made five recommendations for improvements.

Inspectors found that the medical center didn't always have at least two registered nurses staffing the emergency department, as required, during the night shift.

"This could result in potentially unsafe situations in the emergency department when a single registered nurse may need to provide critical care to multiple patients," inspectors wrote.

The emergency department's nurse manager said administrators were aware of the staffing deficiency, but denied requests to hire additional nurses and used inpatient nursing supervisors for backup coverage.

In response to the inspection report, administrators said they have addressed

VA: Page A3

Faced with trauma, focused on the future

Tribes fight rising Indigenous suicide rates with helplines, youth programs

By Natasha Rausch
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Fargo
On a grassy landscape along a sidewalk in Lindenwood Park at the edge of Fargo, Grace Poitra and Robbie Lass knelt to pray.

Lass, from the White Earth

Reservation, and Poitra, from the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, had met four years earlier, and started dating just a few days after they'd first met. Now they had a son together, Joey Little Bear.

During their relationship, Lindenwood Park had become a go-to for whenever Lass



Lass

was going through a tough time. He struggled with substance abuse and depression, issues that Poitra thinks were a result of childhood traumas, like being attacked by a dog as

SUICIDE: Page A5

Winter work planned for Moorhead underpass project

By Barry Amundson
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MOORHEAD — Despite the cold weather, a crew of about 55 is still working on the Moorhead underpass project and is expected to continue through most of the winter.

Ames Construction Co. and subcontractors are working on two railroad bridges, retaining walls and finishing work on the newly constructed 21st Street South near the high school.

Moorhead traffic engineer Jon Atkins said the

21st Street opening, probably Nov. 26 or 27, will provide better access to the school and allow residents in the nearby neighborhood better access to their homes. The street is on the northeast side of the two-year, \$54 million underpass project and will eventually connect to Main Avenue.

A stoplight will be installed on the newly constructed corner of Fourth Avenue and 21st Street by the school, but because traffic doesn't go through farther to the south, Atkins said there will only be stop

signs for now. "We wanted to get it open to vehicular traffic," Atkins said. He added that a sidewalk along the street there isn't done so pedestrian traffic isn't available.

On the west side of the project, Atkins said a new two-block section of Main Avenue that was reconstructed with a new concrete four-lane street and median is open, allowing easier access to the Taste Freeze, Homegrown Hookah and neighborhoods in that area. That newly opened

UNDERPASS: Page A3



A new intersection of 21st Street and Fourth Avenue South near Moorhead High School and Casey's will open to traffic before Thanksgiving. The sidewalk near the retaining wall won't be completed this fall so pedestrian traffic is limited. Special to The Forum

INSIDE TODAY'S FORUM



'Tis the season for the Holiday Lights Parade. PAGE B1

Business.....	A4
Classifieds.....	C5-8
Comics.....	B3
Crosswords.....	C7
Life.....	B
Obituaries.....	A6, C5
Opinion.....	A7
Sports.....	D
Home & Abroad....	C1-2

Today's weather
☀️ 25°
🌡️ 12°

Mostly sunny
Details, D6



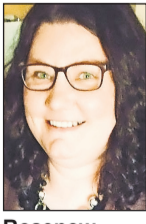
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(Suggested retail price)
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A ND mother's desperate journey to save her daughter

By James B. Miller, Jr.
Forum News Service

DICKINSON, N.D. — When Alice Crawford left her home in Dickinson without telling anyone of her whereabouts back in August, her mother did what any mother would do — never lose hope. After months of tireless searching, she found her daughter and brought her home.

"She has a drug addiction and she called me and told me she was going to leave and I was working to try to get her into a rehab at the time," said Jill Rosenow, mother of Alice Crawford. "The Dickinson police were involved and they said



Rosenow

that there was nothing they could do because she was an adult. It was heart-breaking."

Rosenow said her daughter had a history of battling drug addiction when she ran away to Colorado. That was the last she heard from her daughter, until Rosenow's niece mentioned that Crawford was recently featured in a news feature in Denver about area homelessness.

ROSENOW: Page A3

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BRIEFS

Burgum seeks more time to request presidential disaster declaration

BISMARCK — Gov. Doug Burgum is asking the federal government for more time to request a presidential disaster declaration in the wake of a record-setting wet September and an early October snowstorm, the Bismarck Tribune reported.

Federal guidelines require that a request be made within 30 days of an event, but widespread flooding has prevented access to damaged areas and hampered completion

of preliminary damage assessments, Burgum's office said Tuesday, Nov. 19.

Eleven counties have submitted reports on damages, with eight counties still working on them. Burgum in conjunction with the Department of Emergency Services on Monday sent a letter to the Federal Emergency Management Agency seeking until mid-December to complete and submit the assessments.

North Dakota officials estimate flood damage in the millions of dollars. A presidential disaster declaration would pave the

way for federal aid for emergency work and the repair or replacement of damaged road infrastructure.

Federal Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue recently declared a secretarial disaster designation for 47 of North Dakota's 53 counties, making assistance available to farmers and ranchers.

2 involved in high-speed chase found in woods

DETROIT LAKES, Minn. — Law officers used a police dog to track down

two suspects in a heavily wooded area near Detroit Lakes on Wednesday morning, Nov. 20, after authorities said they had led a deputy on a dangerous high-speed chase in a vehicle stolen in Fargo.

The two, driver Casey Ray Adam, 28, of Moorhead, and front-seat passenger Danielle Nicole Abendano, 33, of Detroit Lakes, had been spotted in the Seven Sisters Spirits on U.S. Highway 59 south of Detroit Lakes about 8:30 a.m. and were known to workers there as shoplifting suspects. They were also known to law officers as being wanted

on warrants, according to a report from the Becker County Sheriff's Office.

There were also two people in the back seat of the vehicle.

As a Becker County deputy responded to the liquor store call for help, he saw the vehicle and gave chase with speeds reaching up to 90 mph. The deputy performed a pursuit intervention technique on the vehicle that ended the pursuit.

The four people then fled the vehicle, with the two in the back seat being apprehended immediately as other officers had arrived to assist.

Adam and Abendano fled into the nearby woods, said a law enforcement report, and were tracked by a police dog who found them about a mile away. The two were taken to the Becker County Jail on warrants and are facing new charges.

One of the back seat passengers was also arrested and taken to the jail on a warrant. The other passenger was later released.

The sheriff's report said meth was also found in the vehicle but did not disclose the amount.

SUICIDE

From Page A1

a toddler, losing his grandmother who took care of him as a preteen, and spending time in juvenile detention thereafter.

Moments after the two had been praying, Lass saw what he thought were doves flying and said it was a sign.

"Those are pigeons, Robbie," Poitra said.

"Those are pigeons, Robbie," Poitra said.

She laughed as she recalled the memory. Those "dorky moments" are what she loved about him.

But Poitra didn't know that as they strolled along the serpentine path through Lindenwood, this would be their last walk together there. About a year later, on June 27, 2016, Lass died by suicide in that park.

Poitra said she didn't go back to the park for a while. Then it became the only place she could go to remember him.

Lindenwood Park has often been the site of Fargo-Moorhead's annual suicide awareness walk each September. The walk aims to shed light on the issue of suicide, which disproportionately affects Indigenous people, like Lass.

Federal data show a bleak picture for the suicide rate in Indigenous communities — the American Indian and Alaska Native population is 3.5 times more likely to die by suicide than racial groups with the lowest rates. But prevention efforts among tribal nations in the region are growing and working to educate youth and adults about risk factors and signs. Prevention coordinators — fighting the effects of historical trauma and marginalization — said they've already seen some levels of success. But quantifying that success is difficult.

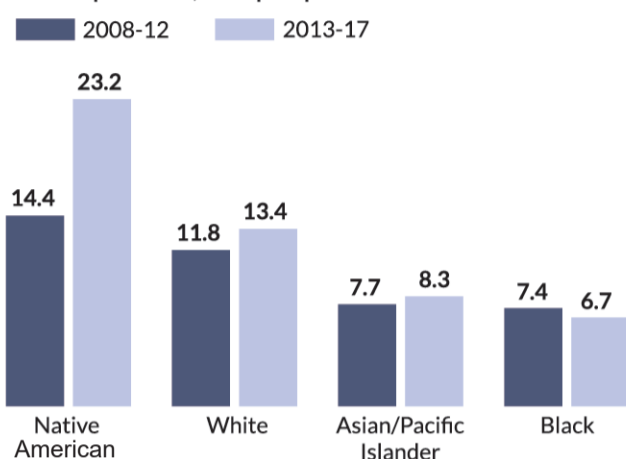
Tribal-specific numbers are hard to come by in North Dakota and Minnesota. Pamela End of Horn, the national suicide prevention consultant at Indian Health Service and a member of the Oglala Lakota Tribe of the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, said she rarely releases data at the tribal level for privacy reasons. That's because individual tribes have relatively small populations, and suicide is such a rare event for individual tribes that one could easily trace a single case back to the person who died.

In Minnesota, where Robbie Lass grew up, there were 98 suicides, a rate of 23.2 per 100,000 people, among the American Indian population from 2013 to 2017. That's a 61% increase from the four years prior. The suicide rate among the white population increased 14% over that same time period, from 11.8 per 100,000 to 13.4 per 100,000.

The American Indian suicide rate in North

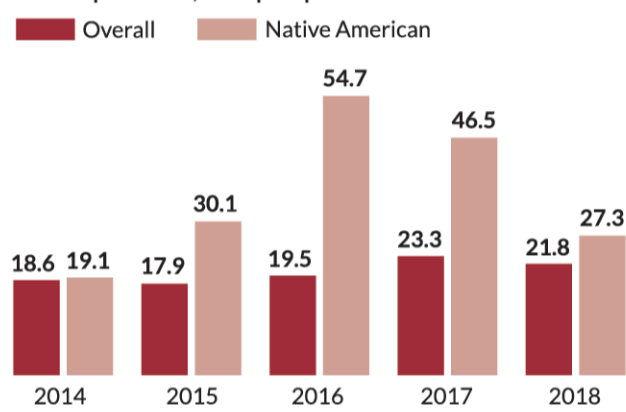
Minnesota suicide rates

Deaths per 100,000 people



North Dakota suicide rates

Deaths per 100,000 people



Sources: Minnesota Department of Health, North Dakota Department of Health
Forum News Service

Dakota is trending upward as well, according to the state's prevention plan. Though the year-to-year rate fluctuates, the average suicide rate among the state's American Indian population from 2014 through 2018 was 35.5 per 100,000. That compares with the average rate of 20.2 per 100,000 among the overall state population.

Suicide data for the Indigenous population remains limited, though, said Gretchen Dobervich, a policy project manager at the American Indian Public Health Resource Center at North Dakota State University. She said tribes have different methods of recording deaths by suicide. Another issue is sometimes the cause of death isn't properly marked on a death certificate. She added that suicide attempts are also difficult to track unless a person seeks medical care.

"There's just a lot of work that needs to be done on the data gap," Dobervich said.

The American Indian Public Health Resource Center is working to collect better data for the Mandan Hidatsa Arikara Nation in western North Dakota. The center partnered with the Elbowoods Memorial Health Center to evaluate their suicide intervention program and to gather baseline rates of attempts and completed suicides, to "get a full picture of what's going on," said Vanessa Tibbitts, a program director at the center and a member of the Oglala Lakota Tribe.

Behind the high rates of suicide in Indian Country is often what's known as historical trauma, said Dr. Donald Warne, the director of Indians into Medicine at the University of North Dakota. Such trauma — stemming from massacres like the one

at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, and government policies such as decades of forced assimilation through boarding schools — is passed down through generations.

"There's a lot of childhood trauma and intergenerational trauma," Warne said. "Children who have trauma grow up and have children with trauma."

Poverty, unemployment, isolation and substance abuse — all risk factors that can lead to suicide — stem from those traumas, Dobervich said.

"They're living the product of that trauma," she said. "It's almost like a double whammy in that you're experiencing the trauma, and plus your everyday life is the result of that trauma."

Survival buddies

Robbie Lass grew up just outside of the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota. When he was a toddler, a dog attacked him, scarring his face. Later on, he went to live with his grandmother, who died of cancer when he was 12. Then he went into the foster care system and spent time in juvenile detention.

As an adult, he received a settlement for the dog attack, and he used some of the money to buy Poitra a promise ring. They later had to sell the ring at a pawnshop.

Someday, Poitra said, she would have married him if he were still alive.

The two met through mutual friends at a party. Both were into drawing tattoos. Poitra is more reserved. Lass was "off-the-wall." He'd do anything to make someone laugh, she remembers.

He knew right away they would be something special, but it took her a little longer to realize it.

They eventually became survival buddies, often couch-hopping or selling

Suicide warnings: Look for the signs

- Talk of feeling hopeless or having no reason to live
- Speaking of unbearable pain or being a burden
- Suffering from depression or anxiety
- Loss of interest
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Withdrawing from activities, family or friends
- Agitation, anger or aggression
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Visiting or calling people to say goodbye

If you or a loved one is in distress, you can call 1-800-273-8255 (1-800-273-TALK).

Source: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

Forum News Service

their possessions to get by. Then they decided they wanted to start a family together, so they had Joey, who's now 5 years old.

Being a dad was hard for him, though, Grace said. He was struggling with depression and substance abuse, and he'd attempted suicide at least eight times before ultimately taking his life.

Since Lass' death, Poitra said she wonders if he thought about Joey before he died, and how he'd have to grow up without a father. She paused. "Eventually I'm going to have to tell him what happened."

The Forum tried to contact Lass' mother and sister for this story, but they couldn't be reached for comment.

Monique Runnels, the director of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's wellness program, said prior to the traumas of boarding schools and attempted cultural genocide, "there wasn't that addiction; there wasn't that abuse. There was always thinking of the future and of future generations."

Among Indigenous populations, youth suicide is "strikingly higher" than the overall U.S. population, according to a report from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. For Indigenous people, the suicide rate decreases with age, compared with the general U.S. population where the rate increases with age.

The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, which straddles the Dakotas and has about 15,000 members, hasn't seen a youth suicide in more than four years. "That's pretty amazing," Runnels said.

Runnels has worked as the tribe's wellness program director for four years. Her suicide prevention efforts can be summed up as "collaboration." The wellness program works with several different groups — law enforcement, the youth council, substance abuse treatment — in its preventative efforts because, she said, "all of it is suicide prevention."

"We're working together to solve those underlying issues that would lead to alcoholism or suicide or drug abuse or anything else," she said.

As for the reservation's adult population, Runnels, a Standing Rock citizen, said suicides are more persistent, likely as

a result of substance addiction.

But, her message about the problem was a positive one: "Yes, a lot of our people may think about suicide, but a majority of our people do not, and a majority get the help they need."

At the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Tribe of the Lake Traverse Reservation, which is mostly in South Dakota but pokes into North Dakota, tribal citizens can get help through a 24/7 crisis line.

Dr. Gail Mason, a member of Canada's First Nations, is the tribe's director for behavioral health and helped start the call center. The crisis line works across agencies, with law enforcement and social services, to set up next-day appointments with callers, do police wellness checks and follow up with patients. Mason said in the past three years since the crisis line's inception, the call center has received and made about 2,000 to 3,000 calls a year.

The call center started after a survey of several hundred tribal members revealed about 95% of them said a crisis line would help overall public health. Mason, who has a doctorate in clinical psychology and a post-doctorate in psychopharmacology, said it's helped connect people in rural areas to services. She added that the top risk factor for the population is lack of connectedness as a result of the rural nature of reservations in North and South Dakota. "We're terribly isolated," she said.

Isolation doesn't only apply to rural Indigenous populations. Lolan Lauvao, the suicide prevention coordinator for the Phoenix Indian Center in Arizona, said Indigenous people who leave their tribe and reservation often struggle with loneliness and disconnectedness.

"It's a great culture shock for someone moving from reservation to the city," said Lauvao, who is a Native Hawaiian of the Samoan Tribe.

The Phoenix Indian Center has served as a gathering place for Indigenous people since 1947, Lauvao said. In his role as the suicide prevention coordinator, Lauvao trains everyone from children to parents on how to talk about suicide in an effort to erase the stigma

around it.

"If we can just be open and normalize it, and people are more comfortable with it, imagine how many lives you can save," he said. "Just because we don't talk about it, doesn't mean we don't think about it."

'It's consistency'

While Lass was alive, Poitra said she struggled to talk to him about his previous suicide attempts, and she said they didn't make a plan for when he had suicidal thoughts. "You don't want to bring it up when you're in a good mood because it'll just ruin the mood," she said. "And then when you're in a bad mood, it's just going to intensify everything."

Since his death, she said talking about him reassures her he was actually there. "It helps me remember that he was a real person, you know? Because people like to forget."

She said it gets a little easier, though, to deal with losing him. But "sometimes it's really hard," she said through tears. "I still miss him every day."

Like Poitra, Claudette McLeod is a citizen of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa in northern North Dakota. McLeod is the tribe's outreach director, and she has been training her tribe on suicide prevention for two decades, focusing especially on the youth population. She started the prevention program alone in the basement of her house. Now 20 years later she has six full-time employees, federal funding for the program, annual events such as a suicide awareness walk, and relationships with the hundreds of students she's helped.

Her program uses the "Sources of Strength" curriculum to educate and train young people on bullying and suicide prevention. Over the years, she's trained 500 kids in the community. Her program also hosts weekly "talking circles" where kids eat, then sit in a circle and share their names, how their weeks are going, and one generous act they did.

In building youth up, McLeod even goes to school sporting events to watch her students play.

"It's consistency," she said. "A lot of kids in Indian Country have been let down already. We need to build these kids up and not let them down anymore."

Poitra said she eventually wants to start a nonprofit group to help young Indigenous boys who face trauma, as Lass once did.

She's hoping that by helping young kids on the reservation, it will allow something positive to come out of his death.

"I've got to try something," she said. "I can't just stay quiet about it."

Readers can reach Native American issues reporter Natasha Rausch, a Report for America corps member, at 701-241-5528, nrausch@forumcomm.com or @n_rausch21.