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DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES

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Alaska Suicide Study enhances prevention and treatment

Understanding the risk factors is the key to effective suicide intervention

(Juneau, Alaska) — In an effort to decrease suicide in Alaska the Division of Behavioral Health, the Alaska Statewide Suicide Prevention Council and the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority today released the Alaska Suicide Follow-Back Study. The three-year study, completed by the Alaska Injury Prevention Center, documents the circumstances surrounding the 426 suicides that occurred in Alaska from 2003 to 2006.

The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services believes that by researching the underlying behavioral risk factors leading to suicide, more effective suicide reduction strategies can be implemented.

“The report dramatically strengthens our knowledge base of suicide in Alaska,” said Acting Behavioral Health Director Stacy Toner. “This study and continued analysis will give us information for designing better methods of prevention and treatment.”

In Alaska, the 20–29 age group has the highest rates for suicide. This varies from national statistics that suggest seniors over 80 are most likely to end their lives. Understanding the reasons, mental state and methods used by target populations to choose suicide is imperative in developing appropriate programs that reach out to those groups.

National statistics and Alaska-specific data regarding suicide differ. Families of Alaska suicide victims were surveyed in the study. The results indicated that suicide victims binge drank at three times the national rate and used marijuana at four times the national rate. Alcohol or drug use was found in 72 percent of the cases tested. The rate for alcohol and drug use by Alaska Natives was exactly the same as for non-Natives. However, the suicide rate for Alaska Natives was more than twice as high as would be expected and disproportional to their percentage of the population.

To view the complete Alaska Suicide Follow-Back Study, visit the Web: www.hss.state.ak.us/suicideprevention. For more information on community-based suicide prevention programs, contact the Division of Behavioral Health at www.hss.state.ak.us/dbh or call (907) 465-3033.