



NORTHLAND

Suicide high in Northland

By: DENISE PIPER - Whangarei Leader Last updated 05:00 09/02/2010

Northland's high numbers of poor, isolated and Maori populations are being blamed for its high suicide rate.

The Health Ministry's latest report into suicide deaths and self-harm shows Northland has the third-highest suicide rate in the country.

Suicide Facts 2007 shows between 2003 and 2007, Northland had a suicide rate of 17.1 deaths per 100,000 people.

Only the Wairarapa and Tairāwhiti (Gisborne) had a higher rate.

Northland's rate is also well above the national rate of 11 deaths per 100,000 people in 2007.

More recent figures are not available because confirmation of death by suicide is subject to a coroner's report.

Nationwide, Suicide Facts 2007 shows a declining rate of suicide deaths since its peak in 1998.

Lifeline Whangarei counsellor George Morris believes the high rate in Northland is due to a lack of awareness of available support.

"We've got some pretty isolated parts of the world up here," he says. "The best way to start fixing it is to create awareness about how to access services available and make sure people know they are not alone."

Lifeline is a good first point of contact because volunteer phone counsellors are able to refer people on to community services, he says.

"Make initial contact then that's one hurdle that you've jumped over – often the first hurdle is the most difficult one."

Lifeline is now looking to expand its services in Northland, including a specialised service for youth and possibly a mobile service.

Jamie Rosemergy, who instigated the Choose Life hot-rod project after the suicide of his brother Rhys, says there are several reasons for Northland's high suicide rate.

"If you're just looking purely at the statistics, unfortunately a large percentage are young Maori – we have a very high percentage of Maori. Lower socio-economic regions have higher rates too – unfortunately we've got both."

Northland's remote areas also contribute to the statistics, he says.

Mr Rosemergy says with the suicide rates being volatile it is hard to say if the numbers are really dwindling.

The Choose Life project is continuing this year with the hot rod being revamped, he says.

A website is being developed with information, a memory board, progress on the hot rod and links to services including Lifeline and Youthline.

Lifeline Northland is available on 437-5055 or 0800-437-5055.