

Inuit leaders announce national Inuit suicide-prevention strategy

Burdened with a suicide rate nine times the Canadian average, Inuit leaders, heartsick at the prospect of losing more young people, are creating their own suicide-prevention strategy for Inuit people across Canada.

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), the national Inuit political organization, announced on World Suicide Prevention Day that it is moving forward with an evidence-informed prevention strategy and action plan. The strategy will serve Inuit people in Nunavut, Nunavik (northern Quebec), Nunatsiavut (northern Labrador) and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (Northwest Territories).

The wider strategy will build on Nunavut's suicide-prevention strategy action plan, which was created in 2010, said ITK President Terry Audla.

An Inuit-specific strategy is critical given the high rates of suicide among Inuit people, and their unique risk factors, Audla told about 150 people gathered on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Ontario, on Sept. 10 at the World Suicide Prevention Day event. Most Inuit people who take their own lives are under age 30, he pointed out. The suicide of a boy in Audla's home community of Repulse Bay, Nunavut, shortly after the boy's 11th birthday in August is among the many deaths that highlight the need for more prevention resources.

"We need to recognize the uniqueness of Inuit communities, their shared history of collective and historical trauma, and the relationship between mental wellness and substance abuse in Inuit communities," Audla said. "We need to address a critical lack of infrastructure in Inuit communities and

strengthen the continuum of the mental health services, especially in relation to accessibility and appropriateness of care."

Most of the Inuit population in Canada is under the age of 25, and

experienced the devastation of suicide, they said. Audla has lost "too many people to list off, sadly" among his own family and friends, he told *CMAJ* in an interview. He also emphasized that despite disproportionate rates among Aboriginal people across Canada, suicide is not a cultural phenomenon.

"Suicide is not a predetermined part of our makeup as Inuit. The Nunavut Suicide Prevention Strategy put it very well: 'Inuit are not predisposed by virtue of ethnicity to be at a higher risk of suicide than non-Inuit'," Audla said. "We were not a high-suicide rate society in the past, and we do not have to be a high suicide-rate society in the future. It doesn't have to be this way."

Both Audla and Dammy Damstrom-Albach, president of the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention, urged everyone to do their part to prevent suicide by taking courses such as the Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training workshop, which can help them

to recognize the signs and be able to successfully intervene when someone they know is suicidal. That training will be an important part of the national Inuit suicide-prevention strategy, Audla said.

"If you do nothing else, you can recognize and help others to recognize that every life counts," Audla said. "In times of despair, take a deep breath, and recognize there is always tomorrow."

The national Inuit organization has hired researcher Jack Hicks, who helped design the Nunavut suicide-prevention strategy and action plan, to



Laura Eggertson

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42% are under the age of 19, Thomas Anguti Johnston, president of the National Inuit Youth Council, told the Parliament Hill gathering.

"We can't afford to keep losing youth," he said. "I don't know any Inuit in Canada that can say they've been unaffected by suicide. It's very present, unfortunately. It's painting quite a bleak picture when we have such beautiful communities, such beautiful land, and a beautiful culture, that we can't find hope within, or we can't find meaning."

Both Audla and Johnston have

pull together the new Inuit strategy. Although ITK has not yet approached Health Canada for financial assistance with the strategy and action plan, it plans to do so, Audla said.

Shawn Atleo, national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, joined Audla, Johnston and representatives from the Mental Health Commission of Canada and the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention in calling on all Canadians to collaborate with Aboriginal people in working to prevent suicide.

“World Suicide Prevention Day is about working together to achieve a

safe and encouraging environment that supports all individuals. Together, we can make this happen,” said Atleo.

Canada is still working on a federal suicide-prevention strategy. Although Parliament passed a private member’s bill into law in December 2012 that created a federal framework for suicide prevention, the framework did not receive any additional money in the 2013 budget, and a specific strategy and policy documents have not yet been created.

Quebec has had a suicide prevention strategy in place since 1998. In the decade from 1998 to 2008, suicide rates in the province declined by about 4%

per year, and by 12% per year among youth aged 15–19, according to the Quebec Public Health Institute. The Inuit organization will draw upon the best practices in Canada and around the world, Audla said.

“We hope to take what the Nunavut government has done and translate that into a national initiative and see if we can somehow support the federal initiative as well, to see if we can bring about real change and bring down the numbers, especially in the Inuit communities,” he said. — Laura Eggertson, *CMAJ*.

CMAJ 2013. DOI:10.1503/cmaj.109-4601