

States seek ways to lower high suicide rates

By David Crary, AP

Throughout the interior West, states in a belt from Montana to New Mexico are looking for ways to lower their highest-in-the-nation suicide rates, although gun-specific initiatives are a touchy topic.

In Montana, with the highest rate, suicide prevention coordinator Karl Rosston acknowledges some frustration as the toll rises, including the recent deaths of several teenagers who used guns from their own homes.

“People are afraid we’re trying to take away guns, which is not the case,” Rosston said. “I understand the sensitivity of it, but I’ve got to ask the questions when we have kids who shoot themselves.”

One of Montana’s hardest-hit areas is the city of Butte and surrounding Silver Bow County, where, according to local health director Karen Sullivan, the rate of gun ownership is far above the national average. Jolted by the recent firearm suicides of six young people, including a good friend of her daughter, Sullivan and others formed a suicide prevention committee and began distributing gun locks.

“All six had ready access to a firearm, and we’re not OK with that,” Sullivan said. “This issue has become very personal to me.”

In Colorado and Nevada, the states’ suicide prevention offices have been reaching out to gun stores and shooting ranges, offering suicide-prevention materials and training. One of the outreach workers in Nevada, Richard Egan, regularly visits gun shows, sometimes giving away high-quality gun locks to people

interested in his message.

Egan, who developed expertise in weaponry during a long Air Force career, said he was heartened by recent news that prosecutors would pursue a felony child-abuse charge in the case of an 8-year-old Las Vegas boy who committed suicide last year. The boy had been left at home without adult supervision, and used a gun left unsecured by the boyfriend of the child's mother.

"That's huge," said Egan of the charge filed against the boyfriend. "We're now going to hold the gun owner accountable."

In Arizona, the overall suicide rate is not quite as high as those of its Rocky Mountain neighbors, but three of its counties – Yavapai, Mohave and Cochise – have among the highest firearm suicide rates in the nation, according to federal data.

Arizona's suicide prevention officer, Kelli Donley, has been working cautiously to see if there are ways to cut down on gun suicides.

"Politically we have to be very careful," she said. "People love their guns in Arizona – we can't tell people not to have guns."

Last summer, Donley said, she went to Mohave County for a suicide-prevention meeting, and got logistical help from a fire department battalion chief in Kingman.

"One week later he killed himself – that was totally defeating," said Donley, recalling how she sobbed during the phone call that relayed the news. "I gave that man every resource I had, and he didn't acknowledge what he was going through."