

Gong's rate of suicide among NSW's highest

By JOHN ELLICOTT

WOLLONGONG has one of the highest rates of suicide in NSW, with an average of 27 people taking their own lives each year.

Between 2004-08, 135 people committed suicide. Wollongong's rate is among the highest in NSW communities without a high percentage of indigenous people.

Wollongong's suicide rate of 9.3 per 100,000 is just under figures for Gosford and Tamworth, with the highest rates recorded in major populations of Aboriginal people in the Central West, North West and on the North Coast.

It places Wollongong's rate as the 11th highest of the 56 NSW statistical divisions. The figures were taken from the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics data collected up to '08.

While the suicide rate has steadily declined in Australia since the mid-1990s, Wollongong's rate until '08 appears to have remained steady.

But there appeared to be a slowing in the rate last year, with 23 people taking their own lives in Wollongong, according to the latest police data, with coronial findings yet to confirm the cause of some deaths.

More than 70 per cent of suicides are by males. It is believed men are usually more successful at completing suicide as they take more extreme measures.

Rates of attempts are about three times that of successful suicides, and annually about 30 people are admitted to Wollongong Hospital for self-harm.

A Senate report last year estimated suicide rates were about 20-30 per cent under-reported due to failures in the collection of statistics and the difficulty in defining some deaths as suicides.

A major forum on suicide risk will be held on March 22 at the Master Builders Club, with mental health experts, counsellors and the public sharing their knowledge on suicide prevention.

The free forum will be held in conjunction with the Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health Network and the Wollongong Suicide Prevention Network.

WHERE TO GET HELP

Lifeline on 131 114 or
www.beyondblue.org.au.



Prevention matters: Sandra Bolack and Alex Darling are happy to share their wisdom in mental health. A bereavement package is being aimed at all community groups. Picture: KIRK GILMOUR

City benefits from voice of experience

MANY of the Illawarra's experienced professionals are giving back to the community in important ways.

Former Shellharbour Hospital head nursing teacher Sandra Bolack and former Wollongong lord mayor Alex Darling are just two.

Both have found a new challenge in the Wollongong Suicide Prevention Network, working with a vibrant committee.

Mrs Bolack not only helps assist those working in suicide prevention as a consulting trainer, but is also on a number of mental health committees. "Too often we lose people with experience," she said.

"We are not getting enough volunteers."

Mrs Bolack and Mr Darling were delighted the Wollongong Suicide Prevention Network was helping people cope.

A preventative and post-suicide package designed by committee members will be

tried by the new Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health Network (ISLHN).

The Bendigo and community sector banks provided \$5000 and the packages may eventually be adopted by NSW Police.

On March 22, the suicide prevention network and the ISLHN Family and Carer Mental Health Team are staging a forum on the risks of suicide in Wollongong, with the backing of Rotary clubs. It will be at the Master Builders Club from 6pm. All interested are welcome.

Mrs Bolack said it was important not to be afraid to ask at-risk people if they have had suicidal thoughts. "Of course, always, we want to tell these people there is so much hope."

Mr Darling has also been involved in setting up a safe house for young people at Berkeley.

WEEKENDER

When a loved one takes their life