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## **Suicide legislation worries activists**

By [Dennis Romboy](#)

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Longtime suicide prevention researchers and advocates are wary of a bill proposing to turn the issue over to the Utah Legislature.

Rep. Wayne Harper, R-West Jordan, has drafted legislation for a task force to develop a statewide suicide prevention plan. Members would come from the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government.

Harper presented his bill Tuesday to the Utah Suicide Prevention Council, which formed in summer to write a statewide suicide prevention plan by the end of the year. It does not have money to implement the plan.

Although council members, many of whom have spent years studying suicide, see the proposal as a chance to obtain long-desired funding, they worry their work and voice will be lost.

"There's reason to be skeptical, but there's also reason to be optimistic," said University of Utah child psychiatrist Doug Gray, the state's foremost suicidologist.

Harper said he intends to unite various public and private groups studying suicide. And to eventually obtain money for prevention, "it's really got to be taken over by the Legislature."

"I just hope people with the expertise get the opportunity for input and to do education," said council member Barbara Thompson, who represents Christmas Box House.

At one death nearly every 24 hours, Utah consistently has one of the highest suicide rates in the nation. It ranks 11th — 14.3 deaths per 100,000 people — over all age groups, according to the most recent data from the American Association of Suicidology. Suicide is the leading cause of death among Utah males ages 15 to 44.

Council members questioned whether Harper is willing to listen to all points of view, particularly when it comes to psychiatry and psychiatric drugs to treat mental illness associated with suicide. Gray and Sherri Wittwer, executive director for the Utah chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, said Harper has declined invitations to meet with them.

Harper said at Tuesday's meeting that religious groups approached him about addressing suicide. He balked, however, when a council member asked him to identify them.

Harper has worked with the Citizens Commission on Human Rights for Utah on previous legislation. The commission is affiliated with the Church of Scientology, which denounces psychiatry and the use of psychotropic drugs.

State lawmakers have shown little interest in funding suicide prevention efforts since Gray and others began studying the problem in earnest 14 years ago. It allocated \$100,000 for youth suicide prevention in 2001.

Suicide awareness program administrators rely heavily on federal grants. Shellie Moskos, a suicide expert at the Intermountain Injury Control Research Center, wonders whether that would dry up if a legislative task force steps in.

But Ron Stromberg, director of the state Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health, said legislative involvement has the potential to reduce suicide in Utah.

"I think this may be an element we've always missed," he said. "Let's start attacking the problem rather than just talk about it."

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