

## **Building a community that offers hope for youth**

*by Doug Holmes*

Many of us are still trying to make sense of the recent mass shooting in Tumbler Ridge that resulted in the heartbreaking loss of life. Our thoughts remain with the families, students, school staff, first responders, and the entire Tumbler Ridge community.

The impact of this unimaginable tragedy has been deeply felt in all our communities. It could have happened anywhere, and it has highlighted the increased need for accessible mental health and social supports.

At least one quarter of all Canadians have experienced mental health challenges at some time in their life. Youth are the highest at risk with social media, loneliness and public disengagement all contributing factors.

Summerland is not immune to these stresses and we have been impacted by the tragic loss by suicide of several young people over the past two years. In response, many individuals and organizations have been stepping up to ensure our youth and their families have access to timely and integrated support services.

School District 67 has been working with the Safer Schools Together (SST) organization to provide guidance for trauma-informed responses in schools while a recent Youth and Family Wellness Fair at Summerland Secondary School saw participation from a wide range of service providers and community partners.

Further, OneSky Community Resources has received provincial government funding to open a Foundry Centre in Summerland to provide local youth aged 12 to 24 and their caregivers access to free, confidential and low-barrier supports including drop-in counselling, peer support, physical and sexual health care, workshops, and education and employment support.

Summerland Council supported and advocated for a local Foundry and OneSky has been demonstrating its commitment to Summerland with outreach services from Penticton. While outreach programs help, they cannot fully replace the benefits of permanent, integrated services based right here in Summerland.

Suicide is a complex issue and no one agency or organization can address it on its own. That's why, as mayor, I invited representatives from various community-based organizations to come together to evaluate and implement strategies to address the local factors associated with suicide. Chaired by Deputy Mayor Erin Trainer, the monthly meetings include representation from the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ministry of Children and Family Development (Child and Youth Mental Health), Interior Health, RCMP, School District 67, Summerland Secondary School PAC, Summerland Child & Youth Committee, OneSky Community Resources, and the District of Summerland.

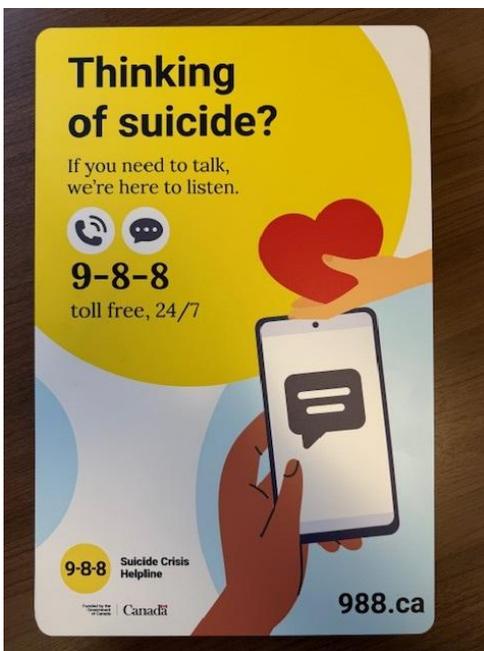
Ultimately, the purpose of the meetings is to create a youth suicide prevention and response plan for Summerland to ensure appropriate crisis measures are in place, raise awareness about available community services and supports, reinforce collaboration between organizations and systems of care, and improve safety in and around the community. The plan will be created with input from people with lived and living experience with youth mental health crises.

Educational efforts include installing 9-8-8 suicide crisis helpline signage around the community, including at the skate park, arena, aquatic centre, Memorial Park, sports playing fields, and the KVR trestle over Trout Creek.

The 250-ft high trestle has unfortunately become a well-known, high-risk location. Discussions are underway with the provincial government, SnPink'tn/Penticton Indian Band, and community stakeholders, including the KVR Steam Railway Society, about the feasibility of installing netting or some other physical barrier on the trestle to help reduce future suicides.

These are difficult conversations, and it's still early days, but by communicating openly and working together, we can build a community that offers safety, belonging, and hope for all our youth.

*Doug Holmes is mayor of Summerland*



*Signage is going up around Summerland to create awareness of the 9-8-8 suicide crisis helpline, the new national toll-free number for anyone who is thinking about suicide or who is worried about someone they know. Trained responders are available 24/7 to listen and provide help without judgement.*