

JINGLE BELLE

Taylor Swift is looking at love — and fame — from both sides now **Inside**



GOVERNOR, SHOWMAN

Schweitzer's brash style won admirers, created enemies **C1**



STRETCH YOUR DOLLARS:
\$102 IN COUPON VALUES

GOOD JOBS
50 EMPLOYMENT ADS/F10

SPECIAL REPORT

A high-country crisis



Friends chat over a home-style lunch in the 600 Cafe in downtown Miles City. Montana's rough and tough "cowboy culture" has been good for the state, but it also has its drawbacks. Some mental health professionals say the inclination to "cowboy up" and avoid talking about feelings or asking for help may be one of the many factors that contribute to the state's abnormally high suicide rate.

Montana's suicide rate leads the nation

Story by **CINDY UKEN**
Photos by **JAMES WOODCOCK**
cuken@billingsgazette.com

There's a romance to Montana that beguiles. Ask anyone to define the state and they'll mention the mountains, the wide-open spaces, the stoic, hardworking cowboy culture.

Like all great places, though, it comes with trade-offs.

Those distances, that stoicism, the frontier pockets of the state where jobs are scarce can be overwhelming.

And it may be why the state that residents regard as the "last, best place" has been near the top in the nation in the rate of suicide for 35 years.

"Montana's suicide epidemic is a public health crisis," said Matt Kuntz, executive director of the Montana chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Last year, at least 452 Montanans killed themselves. That's about 22 people per 100,000 residents, nearly twice the national average.

The victims are military veterans, American Indians, senior citizens and teenagers. Often, they are depressed and hundreds of miles from the nearest mental health professional. Even where they can get help, they tend to "cowboy up," afraid their illness will



Matt Kuntz, executive director of the Montana chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, has had his own struggles with mental illness and is among the thousands in the state who have attempted suicide.

To listen to Glendive psychiatrist Bruce Swarny explain why suicide is so widespread in Montana, see the link in this story at **billingsgazette.com**

be seen as weakness.

Not only has Montana's suicide rate hovered in the top five nationally for decades, in the past few years it has gone up. That spike is reflected across the nation.

In the past five years, the state's suicide rate has crept from 20.1 per 100,000 people to 22.5. Nationally five years ago,

the rate was 10 people per 100,000. Today, it's closer to 12 people per 100,000.

And those are the ones who succeed. A recent federal study suggests that 8.3 million Americans — 3.7 percent of all adults — have serious thoughts of suicide each year; 2.3 million make a plan, and 1.1 million attempt suicide.

The result is an estimated 37,000 suicide deaths annually, and the Rocky Mountain region shoulders the bulk of

Please see Suicide, A6

STATE OF DESPAIR

IN THIS SERIES

■ **Today**, The Gazette begins a series exploring the epidemic of suicide in Montana. During the next several weeks, we'll explore how the crisis affects American Indians, teenagers, veterans and the elderly. And we'll hear from people who are working on solutions.

■ **On Monday**, we profile Matt Kuntz, director of Montana's chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

■ **On Tuesday**, we visit Glendive, where Dr. Bruce Swarny, a psychiatrist, treats patients in a vast region that covers 17 Eastern Montana counties.

To view additional coverage, click on the links in this story on **billingsgazette.com**:

- Interactive maps of suicide numbers from Montana and the nation
- Statistics broken down by age group and means of suicide
- A suicide prevention questionnaire

Before a suicide, a mother's lament; 'Why can't I fix this,' **A7**



©2012 The Billings Gazette
127th year, No. 207

INDEX

Business.....D1 Deaths.....C2-5 Opinion.....C8 Sports.....B1
Classified.....F3 Magazine.....E1 Outdoors.....B8 TV.....D9

Billings Clinic

www.billingsclinic.com

Women's Choice!

Billings Clinic has been recognized with the Women's Choice Award by WomenCertified® for demonstrating extraordinary service in meeting the health care needs of women and their families.

