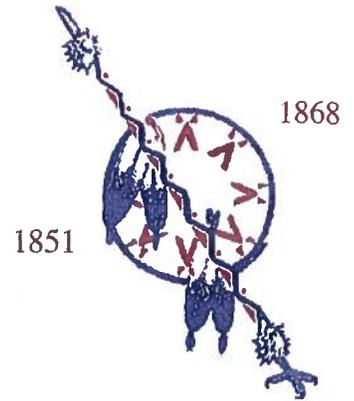


# Oglala Sioux Tribe

## Office of the President

PO Box 2070  
Pine Ridge, SD 57770  
Phone: 605.867.5821  
Fax 605.867.6076



### Testimony of

**John Yellow Bird Steele**  
**President, Oglala Sioux Tribe**

**Before the United States Senate**  
**Committee on Indian Affairs**

**On**

**“Demanding Results to End Native Youth Suicides”**

**June 24, 2015**

Since December, we have lost eleven young people on the Pine Ridge Reservation to suicide.

At least another 176 of our youth attempted it in that period, according to the Indian Health Service, and it treated 229 more with suicidal ideation with plans and intent to carry it out. The Tribe’s Sweetgrass Suicide Prevention Project made contact with 276 of our youth exhibiting suicidal behaviors.

We simply cannot bear to lose any more of our children. We must work harder to show them that we are proud of them, that we love and understand them, and that we are there to support them through their hard times; we must demonstrate to our children that they make us happy. Our youth are our future, and therefore are sacred; whenever we lose one child, it hurts the spirit and soul of every one of our people.

On February 17, 2015, I issued a proclamation declaring a state of emergency on our Pine Ridge Reservation due to the high incidence of suicide of our native youth. This is our second such declaration since 2010. We are struggling. We simply do not have the resources to get out in front of this problem, and are working to do everything we can to keep up. Chairman Barrasso, Vice Chairman Tester, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the prevention of Native youth suicide. There are few topics as urgent as this one, and fewer that are as hard to discuss. I hope this hearing today results in action from this Congress to assist us in saving the lives of our youth. There is no more fundamental way to honor our treaties and the trust responsibility than to ensure the well-being of our young people. They are the future of our Tribe.

One of the most harrowing stories from this epidemic was covered in the New York Times on May 1, 2015. A youth pastor on our Reservation received word that some of our young people had planned a group suicide. The pastor sped to the place it was planned, and found many ropes hanging from the trees. Thankfully he arrived before any children attempted to hang themselves, but found a group of teens had begun to congregate. The pastor prayed with and counseled them on the spot, undoubtedly saving many lives in the process. We can relay stories like this, as horrible as they are, but it is impossible for us to put into words the emotion of seeing a group of friends and family visiting the home of a child who recently took her own life, or to somehow describe the feeling when you see the mother of one of these children doing her best to carry on her day to day life with a wounded spirit. Worst of all, we cannot replace what was missing from the hearts of our lost children.

### The Pine Ridge Reservation Suffers from Chronic Poverty and a Sense of Hopelessness

The causes of suicide are not easily defined, nor can we point to just one. What we do know is that we have to meet this threat from every angle. Such a comprehensive approach is challenging anywhere, but the difficulty is compounded by the pervasive problems found on our Reservation like unemployment, overcrowded housing, substandard or unavailable health care, alcoholism and drug abuse, sexual and mental abuse, poor access to food and heat, crumbling schools, and having inadequate access to counseling or mental health resources.

We are also beset with a great deal of violence against our women and children, particularly domestic violence. While we do not have precise statistics about such instances, one of our women's shelter reports 1,300 instances of domestic violence in the last year, while our Department of Public Safety reports 470 prosecuted cases in 2014. We know not all instances are reported or prosecuted, so these numbers are low compared to reality, but are still far too high for our people. This is a cause of great alarm on our Reservation, and we have been attempting to cease such incidents for years. We have made headway, but we are challenged by not only the above factors, but also the fact that we have very little funding for policing from the BIA or funding for our tribal courts from DOJ. The BIA has taken more than 15 years to design the Kyle Justice Center on the eastern part of our Reservation, and it is still not complete. Even with the new special domestic violence jurisdiction and powers under the Tribal Law and Order Act we are prevented from exercising our rightful authority as sovereigns due to unfunded requirements passed by Congress. These limitations prevent us from fully intervening in this parallel crisis for our Tribe.

Nearly 40,000 of our members reside on our Reservation, yet we have just a handful of mental health professionals. Our school counselors, when there are school counselors, are overwhelmed and our social support networks are taxed to their limits. All of this is taking place in a backdrop of a community afflicted. Our real unemployment rate is more than 75%; our school dropout rate is over 60%, and our per-capita income is below \$7,000 a year – 15% of the National average and well, well below the poverty line. Our suicide rate is more than twice the national average.

The poverty on my Reservation—the root cause of these problems—is overwhelming, and we are victims of all the social ills that accompany chronic, severe poverty, including the

shortest life expectancy of anywhere in the Western Hemisphere other than Haiti. The adults on my Reservation have little hope, and their children see that every day. There are too few bright spots for our people. Just this spring there were heavy rains and flooding on the Reservation; many of our people lost their homes or property and many of our roads were destroyed. Events like this combined with the backdrop of our everyday lives create despair that is very difficult to see through.

This list of troubles is not complete, of course, and even reciting these causes is exhausting for us to do when we weigh these problems in one hand, and the resources and manpower in the other. There is an imbalance. I talk about them, however, to paint the picture that my people see everyday. A sunny day with a breeze coming over the prairie grass and winding through the Badlands is paradise to any visitor to our Reservation, but for our children, such beauty is obscured by the heavy emotional weight they carry and the ominous outlook that things may not get better for them, that they are destined to suffer the same history and injustices our ancestors suffered. The commitment of our people working to combat these feelings and struggles is second to none, but we are restricted by the lack of resources to address all the contributing factors on our Reservation that result in hopelessness in our children.

We face many challenges, but none is a priority more than instilling a sense of hope in our young people. We are worried that the recent surge in suicides is contagious among our youth, with each incident potentially encouraging others. We also have to combat drug trafficking and alcoholism. We are working to instill cultural values in our youth as a result, but then must address incidents like 57 of our best and brightest students attending a semi-pro hockey game as a reward for their achievements, only to have beer poured on them from a VIP box and being told to “go back to the rez.” Helping children as young as eight cope with such an incident is hard enough, but then we had to try to explain to them why our regional newspaper implied it was the children’s own fault that they suffered this indignity. Worse, our people look around the Reservation and see neglect by the United States, our trustee and Treaty partner, whose obligations to honor its promises is not minimized by its past failure to do so. The institutions that others in the country can look to for fairness, pride, and investment are sources of disappointment and oppression for Indian people. These are the kinds of obstacles we face.

None of this is new. The United States Commission on Civil Rights detailed the conditions in Indian Country, federal spending, and the trust responsibility in its 2003 report *A Quiet Crisis*. The report decried the low level of appropriations for Indian programs in the face of growing unmet needs from broken promises by the U.S. Government. The Report found that “the anorexic budget of the IHS can only lead one to deduce that less value is placed on Indian health than that of other populations.” The Report also clearly stated that trust fulfillment is a civil right for Native people. Congress did not follow through on the Report’s recommendations. We need this Committee and this Congress to uphold that civil right: the trust responsibility.

### The Government Must Assist Us in Concrete Ways

We can all read the articles and the statistics, but I come here today to seek assistance with the kinds of things we hardly hear about except in our conversations in places like this Committee. Our discussions must spread beyond these four walls, and our requests cannot fall on deaf ears.

We are encouraged by the meeting we had just last week on June 18 with representatives from the Indian Health Service, Administration for Native Americans, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Housing and Urban Development and the Bureau of Indian Affairs to work on addressing this issue. During that meeting, I presented the attached letter to Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Kevin Washburn and explained that there are many factors that contribute to our youth's despair. It is the totality of the environment in which they live. If you put an animal in a cage with clean water and water laced with drugs and nothing else, over time that animal will go for the water laced with drugs and do so until it dies. The environment is just too barren, too negative, and the drugged water lets it cope and forget. If you put some food in that cage, place some toys in that cage, pet the animal from time to time and pay it attention, the animal would go for the clean water because he is healthy, safe, and well treated and hopes that life will continue. Even with the loving parents we have on our Reservation, the totality of our youths' surroundings is analogous to that barren, sparse, negative cage. It does not have to be this way; we need to give our youth hope. The federal officials in the meeting last week agreed that we must do what we can to provide hope for our children.

We are also gratified to report that the White House has responded to at least part of our requests, and have provided the Pine Ridge School—a BIE-run school—with \$218,000 to help prevent suicide and to help our students and teachers who are traumatized by suicide to heal and recover. The source of the funds is the Department of Education's Project School Emergency Response to Violence grant aid program. The school will use these funds to hire additional counselors and social workers throughout the summer session and in the next school year. This is a good start, but it is just a start to what we need. This is only one of our schools out of 14 schools. Our other schools need these resources also.

Another important aspect to combatting this epidemic is the creation of jobs and economic self-sufficiency. To do so aims directly at the hopelessness that appears to pervade the feelings of our young people. This was not only one of our main requests in my declaration of emergency in February, but has been a constant refrain from the Oglala Lakota Nation. We need support from this Congress to develop infrastructure on the Pine Ridge Reservation that will promote long-term economic self-sufficiency on the Reservation to create permanent jobs to help prevent the causes of this crisis.

We have asked the IHS to deploy Behavioral Health professional to assist us with suicide prevention and intervention. We have asked the IHS hospital to provide debriefing, education, and individual assessment on our youth affected by suicide and to work with our schools to intervene. We also asked the IHS to begin home visits to all homes with youth treated for suicidal ideation, mental health problems, or for attempted suicide. We have not yet seen these services from our trustee. While we realize the IHS is struggling to provide adequate services nationwide due to insufficient funding from Congress, we are faced with a brutally urgent problem, and need immediate assistance.

There are ways this Committee can help us immediately.

1. **Fulfill the United States Government's treaty obligations and fully fund programs.**  
The United States Government's failure to fulfill its treaty obligations to the Oglala Sioux

Tribe in the federal appropriation process is long-standing. It must be remedied. Treaty funding, initially funded by treaty appropriations, are now provided in lump sum program dollars to federal agencies which in turn divide those program dollars up among all tribes, treaty and non-treaty tribes. Consequently, these agencies are short-changing the Tribe in treaty guaranteed services including economic development, education, health, law and order, and others. We see the Government unjustly funding the Tribe at less than 60% of actual need. Treaty benefits are mandatory contractual legal obligations (not entitlements). They should not be subject to sequestration.

The United States Government has a fiduciary trust responsibility under the treaties to protect tribal/Indian property, land, rights and provide resources. Today's Government funding should be protected and guaranteed quid pro quo treaty benefits. Treaties are the supreme law of the land. As U.S. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black said in 1960, "Great Nations, like great men, should keep their word."

Before the Budget Reform Act and sequestration were considered, the BIA, BIE and IHS Indian programs serving my people were already operating at less than 60% of actual need. So, while we strongly support the funding proposals submitted by the President for those Agencies, as a starting point, we need Congress to understand what the President's proposal really does. After factoring in the unfunded increased costs and increased service population since 2000, and the money taken as a result of sequestration, the President's proposals (according to BIA's own numbers) merely put most of our programs back to just below what we were receiving in FY 2012.

For example, the President's proposed increase of \$70 million for Referred Health Care actually consists of: \$35 million for actual FY 2016 inflation, \$8.3 million for actual FY 2016 documented population growth, and \$1.2 to fund the new facility at Yuma. The remaining monies fund: (1) a combined total of 980 additional admissions which divided among the 566 federally recognized tribes, is less than 2 additional admissions per tribe; (2) a combined total of 19,800 new outpatient visits which equates to 3 more outpatient visits per month per tribe, and (3) a combined total of 1,210 new patient trips, which equates to just over 2 more trips per year/per tribe. Every program in the IHS budget has similar shortfalls. Housing efforts only fund 30 to 40 units a year when 100 times that many are needed to alleviate overcrowding. We talk about numbers here in Washington, but in Pine Ridge, these are people. If they cannot access the services they need and that they deserve, it makes it all the much harder to convince them that they are a priority and have value.

- 2. Provide Emergency Funding for Substance Abuse, Suicide Prevention, and Mental Health Care.** The suicide emergency at Pine Ridge is dire. It, however, is not unknown either in our history or throughout the history of Indian Country at large. There are multiple avenues for providing funding that already exist, whether they are in the IHS, the Health Resources and Services Administration, or at SAMHSA. The Indian Health Care Improvement Act Reauthorization created a tribal behavioral and mental health grant within SAMHSA that has received only small amounts of funding each year—and only then on a competitive basis. The amount of funding provided could be used up by a small handful of tribes, yet all tribes need such services in substantial amounts.

Congress can also look to existing programs like the Garret Lee Smith Suicide Prevention Program (SAMSHA / Center for Mental Health Services); the Gathering of Native Americans program (SAMHSA), Assessing and Managing Suicide Risk training (SAMHSA / Suicide Prevention Resource Center); Rural Mental Health First Aid (HRSA); the Bullying Prevention Initiative (HRSA), the Methamphetamine and Suicide Prevention Initiative (IHS), and many other program for new and existing avenues of getting funding and services to tribes. There simply needs to be a federal commitment to addressing this need, as we, on Pine Ridge, have no further resources.

- 3. Commit to Economic Development and Infrastructure on the Pine Ridge Reservation.** Improving economic development is not an easy task, given that it takes a multi-pronged effort. However, the government's responsibility for fulfilling its treaty obligations in this area is just as important as it is in other areas. Congress must provide full funding for Indian education, including the improvement or rebuilding of our schools so our children have safe, warm, and up-to-date learning spaces. Congress must empower tribal people to pursue their treaty rights, which involves the return of land, wildlife management, and support for agriculture (including industrial hemp farming, for which the Department of Justice and the Drug Enforcement Agency has refused to allow our tribal members to undertake, despite the fact that hemp is not marijuana and marijuana is banned on the Reservation). The United States government should take steps to directly employ our people on the Reservation for these efforts and facilitate other job opportunities for our members.

It is also critical for the government to provide Tribes their fair share of infrastructure funding. The Committee is well aware that federal aid highways provide only a small fraction of the funding needed for us to bring our roads and bridges up to standard. BIA road maintenance funding is only at 13% of the need. Our Reservation buildings are falling apart, and our clinics are substandard. The Mni Wiconi Project, which serves our communities with a safe and adequate water supply, needs to be completed as Congress intended; this includes upgrading and transferring the community water systems.

It may not seem like infrastructure is an important part of suicide prevention, but I urge you to come to my Reservation and see for yourself. If you look around you will see crumbling bridges, pot-holed or washed out roads or what used to be paved roads crumbling back to gravel, or schools with leaky roofs and inadequate heat. What would you think? Our children see this and think, "We're not worth the effort." That is unacceptable to us, and should be unacceptable to everyone. We cannot fathom why such neglect is allowed to continue. We need to reverse it for the sake of our Nation.

- 4. Remove Jurisdictional Restrictions and Fund Tribal Law Enforcement and Justice.** Protecting our people from crime and intervening in domestic violence is critical to our efforts to reduce the rate of suicide on the Reservation. Today, the expanded jurisdiction provisions of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and Tribal Law and Order Act (TLOA) are not working for the majority of the large land based tribes. Congress and the Administration never told us that if we wanted to expand our jurisdiction over domestic violence or serious offenders, we had to find our own funding. Juxtapose the expanded

jurisdiction provisions of these two Acts with the BIA budgets for Courts and Law enforcement and you can see that the VAWA and TLOA's expanded jurisdiction provisions are unfulfilled promises.

There have been funding increases in law enforcement over the last few years. However, those increases have not provided us with an increase in officers. Today, Pine Ridge is still short 60 officers from the minimum 110 that the BIA itself, says we need. Our officers are exhausted and morale is at an all-time low.

Our tribal courts also need funding increases. Adding more funding to law enforcement without increasing funding for our courts simply shifts the problem from one side to the other. TLOA and VAWA have created new expectations for our members. We need the Federal government to ensure that our tribal courts and law enforcement programs can fulfill those expectations. Simply put, we need the resources to shore up our police force and make necessary changes to our courts to ensure our judiciary systems work effectively.

BIA's failure to complete the design for our Kyle Justice Center is one of the most pressing problems facing our community. This Justice Center has been at the top of the BIA's construction priority list for over fifteen years. It is not a long term "detention" facility, where alternatives to incarceration can be considered. It is a short term holding facility, a court and a 911 center for the eastern side of our Reservation. This will be the place that our law enforcement will take violent and dangerous persons awaiting arraignment or trial. We need a place to put individuals until sentencing or alternative treatment arrangements can be handed down by our tribal court. Letting offenders back out into the streets just increases the likelihood of violence. We need the resources for officers, courts, and facilities to stanch the cycle of abuse and harm on our lands.

5. **Focus on Education and our Schools.** I mentioned earlier the infusion of funding for the Pine Ridge School to hire counselors for the faculty and students. That is an important step towards improving the place where our youth spend much of their time: our schools. The state of schools in Indian Country is a national disgrace, and the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) is moving at a glacial pace to replace facilities and improve operations. Congress has failed to appropriate sufficient funding to allow schools to both maintain and function day-to-day, forcing our communities to choose one at the expense of the other. Now, the BIE is engaged in a reform effort that they say is "school improvement," but really only is a shift in its own bureaucracy. School improvement will come when our schools receive their deserved direct funding to hire teachers and staff that will be able to impart culture, knowledge, and self-esteem to our youth. We applaud the Congress's move to fully fund maintenance at our schools, but increased funding for operations, reduced bureaucratic requirements by the BIE, full funding for tribal colleges, and immediate funding for improvement or reconstruction of our school facilities is also required. Our best chance to reach youth is at school, and we must be able to make school a beacon of hope for them.

- 6. Follow Through On Commitments.** As I said earlier, we met with many government officials last week to discuss this crisis on my Reservation. Representatives of HHS, IHS, and the BIA all agreed that action was needed. The question now is when will that action take place? My Reservation has also been recently designated a Promise Zone by the President, a program designed to accelerate economic mobility in high poverty communities. While a Promise Zone designation does not come with money, the program is designed to help cut red tape, and to provide us with professional assistance on grant and loan applications to help us complete our sustainable development plan in housing and education. Our federal partners must assist us in meeting these goals; our federal partners include Congress.

A bright spot for us in this struggle is the Tribe's Sweet Grass Suicide Prevention Project, which was designed by the Tribe to address youth suicide and prevention on the Reservation. As with all of our programs, however, the Sweet Grass Project's funding is in jeopardy. The program's staff works 24 hours a day to be there for our youth in crisis, and work proactively to prevent suicide and self-harm by integrating healing practices based on our Lakota culture and history. The Lakota Culture is very important in suicide prevention in order to be effective: one primary aspect is *Wowausila* (having compassion for the people). Another is *Wokigna* (comforting people when they are experiencing the psychic pain that prompts them to commit suicide). Another is *Wazila* (a Lakota cultural way of using sweet grass or sage to purify an area) before one offers a *Wochekiya* (an appeal to the creator and the spirits for assistance during a difficult time).

Sweet Grass Project staff and volunteers at all times are on call to help anyone who needs for assistance in a crisis, and they are constantly seeking to engage our community proactively to avert tragedies before they happen. The Project also helps train "first responders," since coaching people not to panic when they are in a suicidal situation is important, because they need to stay with the individual until help arrives. This is where the cultural value *Woohitika* (bravery, finding the courage within oneself to stay calm during this critical time) plays its most important role. Most people on the Pine Ridge Reservation who express ideation are under the influence of alcohol or drugs, and cannot always help themselves. This is why it is important to get others involved to help: *Tiwahe* (the immediate family), *Tiospaye* (the extended family), *Ospaye* (the community), *Chanksa yuha* (law enforcement) and tribal programs. All of these play an important role in our efforts, and it is critical that we have the resources to develop and sustain the relationships between them to help prevent suicide and suicidal ideation.

We remain committed to beating the epidemic of youth suicide on the Pine Ridge Reservation, and we hope that you respond to our requests for assistance. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.