

Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
Hearing on Indian Youth Suicide
May 17, 2006
Testimony of William E. Martin
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Introduction

Chairman McCain, Vice Chairman Dorgan, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify at this hearing – a hearing that I hope will help find ways to end a suicide crisis we face throughout all of Indian Country.

My name is William Martin and I am the Chairman of the Alaska State Suicide Prevention Council, appointed by Governor Frank Murkowski in 2004. I am also 1st Vice President for the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska. Our Tribe is constantly looking for ways to reduce the factors leading to suicide among our people.

Alaska State Suicide Prevention Council

The Alaska State Suicide Prevention Council consists of governor-appointed representatives drawn from state behavioral health agencies and boards, the Alaska Federation of Natives, our state legislature, secondary schools, clergy and youth. Our Council meets quarterly to put a spotlight on what measures are working to combat suicide in Alaska.

The Council serves in an advisory capacity to the legislature and governor with respect to what actions can and should be taken to:

Improve health and wellness throughout the state by reducing suicide and its effect on individuals, families and communities;

Broaden the public's awareness of suicide and the risk factors related to suicide;

Enhance suicide prevention services and programs throughout the state;

Develop healthy communities through comprehensive, collaborative, community-based approaches;

Develop and implement a statewide suicide prevention plan; and

Strengthen existing and build new partnerships between public and private entities that will advance suicide prevention efforts in the state.

I want to outline briefly the magnitude of our problem, and then report on what seems to work in preventing suicide and what it would take to be more successful.

Statistics

For the past decade, Alaska has had the second highest rate of suicide in the United States; twice the national average. In the North Slope and West Coast regions of our state, the suicide rate is five times our average state rate. And what's worse, our highest rate of suicide is among those ranging in age from 15 to 24 years old.

Alaska Natives commit suicide at two to three times the rate of non-Natives in Alaska. Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among Alaska Natives, accounting for almost one of every 12 deaths. Alaska Natives suffer suicide rates of 42.7 per 100,000 population, four times the national rate of 10.6. Native males and youth are hit the hardest. Our male Native suicide rate is 68.5 per 100,000 population, more than 6 times the national average. Our teen Native suicide rate is 110 per 100,000 – nearly six times the rate among non-Native teens.

Response

The aftermath of completed suicides leaves people and communities feeling helpless and overwhelmed. Our Suicide Prevention Council has offered a work plan to prevent suicide that we distribute within the many diverse communities throughout our State. While no one answer fits every one of our many cultures, we believe there are tools that make suicide preventable. Our job is to find, shape, and promote those tools.

Our work plan combines an analysis of the problem with words of wisdom from our Alaskan elders. It sets thirteen prevention goals that a community can use to meet its

specific suicide prevention needs. The ultimate goal is, of course, to reduce the number of deaths by suicide. But to get there, communities need to watch out for the early signs of suicide, eradicate stigma of treatment, and remove the factors that often lead to suicide. I submit with my written testimony a copy of our work plan and our annual report to the Alaska State Legislature, and request that all of these documents be accepted into the record of this hearing.

Gatekeeper Program

Our Suicide Prevention Council has increased its suicide prevention and awareness efforts through a media campaign and through effective use of the Gatekeeper program. Gatekeeper programs reduce suicide rates by training first responders, such as emergency personnel, public safety officers, clergy, and others who may be approached in a suicidal crisis but who typically lack specific suicide prevention experience. The Gatekeeper programs result in more effective crisis intervention. We shape our Gatekeeper programs to fit the diverse learning styles and modes of communication across the professional, cultural, and geographic challenges represented throughout Alaska. The program is cost-effective in that it uses personnel already in the community for other crisis response purposes and provides them with specifically targeted intervention tools to fend off crisis suicides. We could do far more Gatekeeper training if we could gain greater access to federal funding for these programs. This cost-effective approach works. It deserves more financial support.

Suicide Is At Odds With Native Community Values

As an Alaska Native leader, I have become convinced that my people must go back and study the lessons given us by our ancestors. They lived in a time before alcohol was introduced into our communities. Suicide then was unheard of except in a rare case where one had grievously shamed one's family or despicably hurt another. Our families and clans were central to our lives. Our ancestors realized that the unconditional love of a parent may interfere with the child learning the basic facts of life so the responsibility rested on the mother's brother or sister. Uncles and aunties thus had a big part in training children.

I myself was exposed to a suicide at an early age. I was about six or seven years old when a man in our community killed himself with a shotgun. My parents tried to protect me by not talking about it but my uncle explained to me in detail how the man killed himself. My father was a little bit upset that I was told this but that event is something that has lived in my mind for all my years. We don't stop further suicides by denying that a suicide has happened. We stop it by confronting it, in all its ugliness and horror.

And while my stance may not make me very popular, I am convinced tribal leaders must set an example for our people by abstaining from alcohol. Whether or not alcohol is a problem for us as individuals, we leaders need to demonstrate to our people that alcohol is the cause of most of our social problems. Alaska Natives as well as all Native Americans are very sensitive people. At times, I have looked at this as a fault, but now that I'm older, I appreciate this as a gift of the Creator. We are easily pleased, we laugh a lot, but we are also easily hurt. Alcohol magnifies our hurts many times over to the point that many of can see no reason to go on living. Once depression sets in, we try to escape the hurt by drinking more which has a snowball effect from which too many of us cannot recover.

Suicides in a community tend to go in streaks, and I think I know why. I believe there is a copycat effect that is encouraged by how we talk about people after they kill themselves. For example, at a funeral for someone who has committed suicide, we celebrate the life of that individual by saying only good things about him or her. We never say anything bad about any person who has died. We don't talk critically about the awfully self-defeating choices they made that ended in the ultimate self-defeat – suicide. Some youngster attending the funeral may hear all this and ask himself “is this all I need to do to have them say nice things about me and be appreciated?” We need to talk to our young people before this happens. We need to praise their good qualities while they are living. Natives don't usually openly demonstrate day-to-day affection and love for our children because of some of our cultural ways – we just don't do that. We need to change this; our Native cultures are living entities to be shaped by us the Natives alive today.

Native Suicide Prevention Programs That Work – If Funded

To change our culture, to change our ways, we will need funds from outside our impoverished communities to support suicide prevention programs that assist our elders and leaders in changing the attitudes of our people. Given how remotely located and diverse are our cultures and languages, such programs require relatively large sums of money when compared with the cost efficiencies of setting up and operating a suicide prevention program in suburban America. Native communities simply cannot compete on the same playing field for funds from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDCs).

One of our regions hit hard by suicide, the Yukon – Kuskokwim Delta, through the Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP), has organized a plan called “Kinguliamta Ciunerkaat” which means “Securing a Future for our Children”. Its

mission is to create a "well community" in which all entities work together under the direction of the Elders to restore a healthy community strong in its culture and language”.

Likewise, my own Juneau Tlingit and Haida Community has developed a modest program that involves Native teachers in button-blanket making, weaving, and carving to pass on the knowledge to our youth. This has shown to be a great success in bringing back Native pride and Native values, the key defense mechanisms against hopelessness and depression that can lead to suicide. These youth are blossoming because they have a regular opportunity to simply talk with and learn from their Elders. Every Saturday afternoon you can see a bustle of activity and eagerness among the youth in being able to learn of and replicate their ancestor’s way of life. My local community found this program to be so vital that, after outside funding dried up, we re-budgeted our paltry funds so that the program could be continued, albeit at a much smaller scale than the need demands.

Solutions Must Address Diverse Factors, and that is Costly

We are making some progress in Alaska in our fight against suicide. But every new suicide tells us our battle is far from over. Our remote communities stretch over a land mass that is one-third the size of the continental U.S. Our communities have dozens of cultures and languages and histories. There is no single program that will work everywhere. But one single approach does work everywhere, and that is an approach that restores Native pride and culture and utilizes the existing Native community leadership of elders to teach our young the basic tools of suicide prevention.

This Committee, and the U.S. Congress as a whole, has long been sensitive to the unique challenges that confront the people in Alaska, Native and non-Native alike. I ask that you consider working with the other Committees of Congress and our state congressional delegation to carve out special pools of funding within existing SAMHSA and CDCs and Indian Health Service (IHS) competitive grant programs for suicide prevention efforts and thereby allow our Alaska communities, particularly the smaller and more remote communities, to more fairly compete for critically needed funds. A little bit can go a long way in our smaller communities, but we lack the infrastructure necessary to compete with the grant writers in America's inner cities and suburbs. Funding carve-outs for Alaska in each of these federal agency programs would allow us to compete among ourselves, and represents, I think, the fastest way to expand our most successful programs and reduce our disturbingly high rates of suicide.

Mr. Chairman, I again thank you for this opportunity to present testimony today. I am available to answer any of your questions.

