

~ Testimony ~

Senate Hearing for the Committee on Indian Affairs

March 25, 2010

Testimony written by Coloradas Mangas, Mescalero Apache Designee

Good Morning Honorable Members of the Committee on Indian Affairs and other distinguished guests. It is a great honor and privilege to testify on a public health and social justice issue that has disproportionately affected Indian communities throughout the country. My testimony is dedicated in honor of those whose voices will never be heard and who continue to suffer in a culture of silence and shame.

[Introduction in Apache Language] English Translation: My name is Coloradas Mangas. My mother is Cri-Cri Mangas and my Father is Carl Mangas. I have two sisters: Danielle and Kiana Mangas. I am Chiricahua Apache from the Mescalero Apache Indian Reservation in New Mexico. I am 15 years of age and currently a sophomore at Ruidoso High School in Ruidoso, New Mexico.

I'm here due to my past and I'm a survivor of teen suicide. It is my sincere hope that my words will inspire change and help address this serious situation. Allow me to begin by telling you about my past.

The first time I had to deal with teen suicide was when my sister Danielle's friend killed himself, when I was in the seventh grade. It was hard for me to see my sister in that stage. The second time was when my sister Kiana's friend killed himself two years ago. Next was in September of 2009 at the beginning of the school year. That's when it really started to take a hard toll. My friend killed himself. He was a good person and a helper to

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all. He was a Fire Rescue worker and he had seen it all. Things I could never imagine. No one saw it coming.

Two weeks later, my sister Kiana's other friend killed herself. That was a hard one. Not only for her, but for a lot of youth on the reservation as she was a friend to all. Right after she killed herself. my grandmother passed into the next life. After that, another two weeks went by and my other friend killed herself. Two weeks later, my other friend killed herself. That night I didn't know what to do. I had no one to turn to or talk to.

The only thing I could do was go to church. It was a Wednesday night and I attend youth group regularly at our Reformed church. As I was at church, I got a message I thought I never would get. A text message from my friend saying she loved me and that I'll always have a place in her heart. I didn't know what to do. The only other thing I could do was call the police - who didn't respond. I went and walked in the woods from 9pm to midnight. I looked everywhere, every tree, and I found her. It was a good thing I found her when I did, otherwise she would be gone forever.

I knew that this issue was bigger than I could handle by myself. I made an appointment with the psychologist at the mental health clinic. It was nice having someone who listened and understood what I was going through. I am more of an exception than the

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rule because most youth won't go to the mental health clinic. The stigma and shame keeps people away.

When I look at the resources that our neighbors have in the town of Ruidoso, I can't help but notice how limited our I.H.S. hospital is when it comes to basic care and more importantly, mental health services. We have a mental health clinic, with only one full time psychologist. One psychologist to serve a community of 4,500 children, youth and adults. It is my understanding that she is currently on administrative leave – indefinitely. With her gone, we have a huge gap in the continuity of care.

What troubles me is that law enforcement and the court have a larger role to play during an attempt or completed suicide compared to our mental health clinic. Most attempters don't seek help and some are court ordered to attend therapy. This role of the courts and law enforcement criminalizes their behavior and makes their recovery seem less important.

I applaud our community though. The tribal administration finally understands that our community-based services are not connecting in a vital way to meet the challenges of children and youth with serious mental health needs and their families. With this said, our tribe has applied for the SAMHSA Systems of Care grant. It is my hope that we can fundamentally change the way our services are delivered.

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Due to the most recent rash of suicides, a new program started in the community called the Honor Your Life Program. It is a SAMHSA funded program that is designed to implement and evaluate a comprehensive early intervention and suicide prevention model.

A new program that is supposed to change attitudes and beliefs about suicide can be culturally taboo, because in our culture, we don't talk about death. When it comes to suicide, talking about death and dying is the only way to break the culture of silence that is taking the lives of so many of my friends and other youth.

I believe in change. I believe that we can meet the needs on our reservation. First, we need to increase program awareness and cooperation – targeting both youth and adults to get involved in these programs. Second, by helping the mental health clinic become fully staffed, getting faster hiring approval for these clinicians, and ensuring faster Medicaid approval for persons referred to residential treatment centers.

Having more providers is vitally important. We have four providers at the school I attend and it seems unjust that we only have one provider for our community on the reservation. We need more than one psychologist so more people could be seen more regularly. Having one provider means that most people are operating in a crisis mode between long

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visits. We could also help by getting providers to work together with law enforcement during suicide attempts or completion to immediately provide family based aftercare.

Other things that I believe would help prevent suicide, is by giving the youth more things to do so it would get them away from drugs, alcohol, and idle trouble. We need more leadership activities to inspire our youth to change their life course. Sometimes I think our community forgets that a tribe's legacy rests in its children and not in how well tribal enterprises operate.

We desperately need a shelter for the youth if they need a place to stay at certain times when the home life becomes very toxic. We have heard from other youth that if they just had a place to go for the night, that they would not have made an attempt on their life.

I am very thankful to have the opportunity to share these ideas that other youth in Mescalero also have. I am also from a new generation of young men and women who believe in breaking the silence and seeking help. I come from a people whose pride runs deep, but I also understand that sometimes, pride can keep us from asking for help. Lastly, I would like to thank my friends and the people that believe in me and mostly for your time. In my Native language,

Ixehe' [Thank you]