

Youth Suicide in Indian Country
Testimony of Hayes A. Lewis
To the
United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
Senator Byron L. Dorgan, North Dakota, Chairman

February 26, 2009

Good Morning Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. I appreciate the opportunity to present testimony on a topic of grave importance in Indian Country-that being the extremely high rates of youth suicide among Native American youth.

My name is Hayes Lewis. I am an enrolled member of the Zuni Tribe. Presently I serve as the Director for the Center for Lifelong Education at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Today, I want to provide an overview of the Zuni Pueblo efforts to reverse a long term trend of youth suicides. I will also highlight the status of prevention activities in New Mexico then briefly review our activities and commitments as tribal colleges to assist tribal communities strengthen their capacity to address critical challenges, and then offer some recommendations to effectively address youth suicide within tribal communities.

The Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) is the only congressionally chartered tribal college in the United States. Our academic and arts programs are accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association and the National Association of Schools of Arts and Design.

We serve students from 80 tribes, 23 states, international students and students from area public, private and Bureau of Indian Education high schools. IAIA offers AA, BA and BFA degrees in Studio Arts, Creative Writing, Museum Studies, New Media Arts as well as Indigenous Liberal Studies.

The Center for Lifelong Education provides custom designed training and technical assistance in nine programmatic areas along with extended academic and outreach training opportunities through distance education, applied research and cultural exchanges. We provide services to Indigenous nations and tribal communities regionally, nationally and internationally.

I want to acknowledge the work of all of my colleagues and especially those community members who are on the ground in our Pueblos, our reservation and urban tribal communities and daily work to strengthen our people through their care, skills and efforts.

After conducting these hearings over the years, you are likely to have a grasp of the magnitude and complexity of the issues and current statistics associated with youth suicide.

Over the years a number of promising practices have emerged. Some of these have been community driven initiatives, there have been a number of policy and funding initiatives within the Indian Health service and other national agencies. There have also been legislative initiatives and support at the state and federal levels.

A Promising Practice: Zuni Life Skills Development Program

I am very pleased and grateful for Dr. LaFromboise presence on the panel today. She has spent many years examining the issues of youth suicide in Indian Country, but more importantly, she is a valuable resource to tribes to assist in their efforts to design appropriate prevention programming to end youth suicide.

During my tenure as Superintendent of the Zuni Public School District, I requested that she and her team of experts from Stanford University come to Zuni to assist our community experts to design a culturally based youth suicide prevention and intervention program and curriculum.

Three years were invested in community based research, designing a culturally based approach to address suicide, awareness building and training, refining life skills teaching/learning approaches and plans, meeting with parents, consultation with the Zuni Board of Education and Zuni tribal council, designing and deploying identification and referral procedures, and mobilizing community inter-agency effort in a focused manner to stop youth suicides.

When we had a viable prevention and intervention plan and program in place-the suicides stopped. A long term historical trend had been broken and the page was turned to a new, life enhancing chapter of experiences for the Zuni community and youth.

The strength and viability of the Zuni Life Skills Development Program is evident in the longevity of the impacts in the Zuni community and a track record of over fifteen years where there were no youth suicides in Zuni.

The weakness has been that local policy makers, community agencies, school administrators and the tribal council members forgot how fragile the peace was-they rationalized that since we had not had a youth suicide in years-the problem was solved. The curriculum was relegated to a shelf in the library and the hard gained experience and the value of lost lives was forgotten. The warning signs within the community have been evident for a number of years and recently, the suicides returned.

What did we learn?

Suicide prevention and intervention requires constant vigilance and appropriate action at many levels. This requires a collective energy, commitment, careful orientation, focused training, community awareness, school and community collaboration strategies, and the creation of effective, culturally responsive policies and protocols. The Zuni school administration and board decided that the energy expense and effort was no longer a high

priority, and this effectively stopped the progress to the second stage of community empowerment.

The fact that this did not occur can be traced back to three important reasons: 1) the lack of acknowledgement and acceptance by key community individuals that suicide represented a serious health and safety threat to the entire Zuni community, 2) ineffective tribal and community leadership and advocacy for the health and safety of tribal members, and 3) a decline in collaboration locally and with national health services agencies and resources to address suicide and related issues in systemic and proactive ways.

On a more positive note, we know that the experience and success of the Zuni Life skills Development Program (ZLSDP) gave rise to the American Indian Life Skills Development Program which is available through Stanford University to any tribe or community that are searching for a template for effective suicide prevention and life enhancing programs.

The curriculum and program effectively stops or reduces the incidence of youth suicide when implemented in coordination with tribal/community leadership, parents, students, local and national health services providers.

There has been a rise in youth suicides nationally, so we must continue the search for meaningful options such as the ZLSDP to address this public health crisis. In our search for solutions we must be guided by our success as well as our failures, and learn from each experience.

Youth suicide is preventable

Youth suicide in Indian country is preventable. However the task of positively and proactively ending youth suicide in tribal communities, will require a number of changes of perspective regarding what can and must be done.

Too often, tribes and supporting community agencies, schools and school districts have not taken the initiative to develop proactive strategies to comprehensively address health and safety issues and challenges in a holistic manner. This is not to say that there is a lack of concern or effort, rather there seems to be a lack of priority along with a piecemeal approach which impacts the overall analysis, design and implementation of community based prevention strategy and programming.

Dr. Richard Carmona, U. S. Surgeon General stated previously that “among tribal populations, suicide is not an individual clinical condition, but also a community clinical condition”.

I truly believe this to be the case and while we recognize the debilitating impacts of historical trauma and other environmental causes that represent limitations and promote dependency among our people, we must go well beyond this discussion and critically

think about ways to demonstrate leadership as well as our individual and collective responsibility to create safe, life enhancing tribal communities.

Until we move to a discussion about the collective tribal loss represented by a single suicide, we will not fully engage the reality that our communities need to be healed in many ways. In this realization we then may find the courage to discuss openly and respectfully the value that a single life represents to the whole, and that self-inflicted death is not acceptable.

In my experiences working in my community, I have witnessed the numbness that results from parents unable to understand why their child took their own life? What went wrong? In their grief they have lashed out at their neighbors, other relatives and even blamed themselves for the death of their son or daughter. The continual loss of life due to suicide adds an immense burden and stress on everyone, particularly the survivors. There must be a focused community effort, led and supported by the tribal government to comprehensively address the grief and pain of the community, so healing may begin.

Many of our Native American youth attend off reservation public school districts that have demonstrated little sensitivity to their needs, issues and cultural values. School administrators working in public schools serving Indian populations are so bent upon meeting the high stakes demands of testing and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) that they have no time to do more than the minimum expected when it comes to responding to the emotional and cultural needs of Native American students. All of these amounts to a message: I'm sorry, but I don't have time for you-you don't count.

The New Mexico Suicide Prevention Activities

A number of important developments have occurred in New Mexico as related to the prevention of youth suicide. While New Mexico has consistently ranked among the top five states for suicide rates in the United States with a rate of between 1.5 to 2 times the national averages, the state has developed a consistent process that maximizes its scarce resources to support all communities to address the challenges of preventing youth suicides.

The creation of the New Mexico Suicide Prevention Coalition has accomplished much to create awareness, provide resources and assist communities tribal and non-tribal to work toward the prevention of youth suicide.

Over the past two years the Center for Lifelong Education has participated as a coalition member and supported coalition efforts by providing workshops and training to tribal and non-native community members, students and service providers in awareness, prevention and capacity strengthening using culturally based approaches to planning and community mobilization.

By prioritizing resources and proactively developing collaborations with tribal communities, the New Mexico Public Health Department has demonstrated that it has a

stake in promoting the development of locally developed approaches to meet this extraordinary public health challenge.

Role of tribal colleges in promoting tribal capacity building

Most tribal colleges are at the forefront of interactions with tribal communities. They serve as a valuable resource to intergenerational populations and are available to contribute to the enhancement of tribal capacity and sustainability in areas such as youth suicide and to enhance community health and safety.

The Institute of American Indian Arts takes its role and responsibility to the nineteen Pueblos, Navajo and Apache Nations in New Mexico very seriously.

By initiating the Center for Lifelong Education, IAIA extended its outreach and technical assistance to tribes and has become known as a dependable resource and advocate serving area and regional tribes in a number of critical areas to include suicide prevention. I am attaching a copy of a news article along with a copy of our last youth suicide prevention conference.

Recommendations

I respectfully offer the following recommendations to strengthen tribal capacity to address the health and safety of community members based on our work, experiences and observations.

Make a commitment to designing a unified community wide strategy to enhance life and prevent youth suicide.

In tribal communities in the southwest, the experience at Zuni Pueblo, Dulce (Jicarilla Apache) and White Mountain Apache in youth suicide prevention demonstrate how the dynamics of community perceptions and disability are changed when tribal/community leadership make a commitment to unified, community based action.

Develop comprehensive community plans that address the complex issues that impact youth at home, in the community and the schools.

In Developing a comprehensive action strategy and plan to address the challenges faced by youth we must consider that the challenges of youth today are much more complex than in our day. Not only do today's youth have to contend with social and economic challenges, they must also contend with the fear of other violent behaviors such as bullying in all of the contemporary contexts: cyber bullying, cell phone bullying, racism, homophobia, gang activity.

Tribal and community leaders must take the lead in supporting the establishment of safe and healthy communities.

There also must be a commitment to continue prevention and safe community practices and protocols in a consistent manner when such protocols are established. Tribal leaders must initiate policy that will bring all partners to the table to discuss options and create opportunities to establish safer and healthy communities.

Schools and public districts serving Indian populations must be held accountable and responsive to tribal prevention plans.

School officials and decision-makers must become partners with tribes to promote tribal strategies and prevention needs. This means systematic and meaningful consultations on a regular basis with tribal and community leadership. Not just during a crisis.

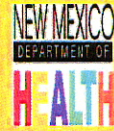
Provide funding to support training to enhance tribal capacity to address youth suicide.

This may be accomplished in several ways. Provide funds to agencies such as the NM Suicide Prevention Coalition, to tribal colleges, directly to tribes and /or to agencies such as the Indian Health Service. Many of the service providers and front line workers in our communities are tired of the crisis-response-intervention-dependency syndrome faced by many tribal communities when interacting with outside of community agencies. Under such stressful circumstances, knowledge transfer is not optimal and the feelings of inadequacy and dependency are heightened. Make funds/grants available to tribes with requirements that include stronger collaborations, the design of holistic strategies, training and knowledge transfer.

Thank you for providing this opportunity.



**** Free Conference ****
Strengthening Our Communities
Collaborative Approaches to
Prevent Youth Suicide
Institute of American Indian Arts Campus
August 11-12, 2008



Day One

- ◆ American Indian Life Skills Development Program
- ◆ Bullying/Gangs and Co-Destructive Behaviors in Schools
- ◆ Youth Presentation - Natural Helpers: Peer to Peer
- ◆ Youth Suicide Prevention Initiatives in Northern New Mexico
- ◆ The Way of the Warrior - Cultural Teachings & Leadership from the Bow and Arrow

Day Two

- ◆ Cultural Model to Strengthen Families: Implementation Strategies
- ◆ Ho'opono pono: Native Hawaiian Healing Approaches
- ◆ Coping with Trauma & Grief, Surviving the Death of a Loved One
- ◆ Cultural Education and Traditional Games for Prevention and Leadership
- ◆ Healing Practices in Recovery
- ◆ Culturally Based Healing Practices

Presenters

Dr. Teresa D. LaFromboise, PHD, Stanford University (Miami)
Keahi Souza, MSW, MS, ABD, Counseling Psychology (Native Hawaiian)
Dr. Chris Fore, Albuquerque Area Behavioral Health Consultant, IHS
Stephen LaBoueff / Blackbear, MPH (Blackfeet)
Shirley Villegas and Students
Katrina Kohler Hayes, Dir., Gerard's House
Joseph Brophy Toledo, Traditional Practitioner (Jemez)
Kathy Wan Povi Sanchez, President, Tewa Women United (San Ildefonso)
Lea Lewis, MPH, IAIA CLE Sr. Associate, USDA Outreach Program (Zuni)
Joyce Naseyowma-Chalan, MPH, Assoc. Dir., UNM CNAH (Hopi)
Michelle L. Suina, MPH, Program Specialist, UNM CNAH (Cochiti)
Patrick S. Trujillo, Certified Alcohol Counselor (Cochiti)

Norma Rey Vazquez de Houdek, Coordinator, NM State Dept. of Health, Youth Suicide Intervention Project



"I Wish I Would Have..." H. Clay Napie, Jr. Dine



"As a Native American photographer, I feel it is important to show what the issues are on the reservations. Suicide is one of the biggest problems, because more and more Native Americans are giving up on life. Suicide has taken away three of my relatives in the last five years: my uncle Teddy Castiano, Jr., my cousin Shani Castiano, and my cousin Nehemiah Castiano. I realized, through this experience, that you can be hanging out and talking to loved ones one day, and then the next day may be the saddest day of your life because they are gone. I did this project because I wanted people to know that losing a loved one to suicide is hard, but I also wanted to show my respect to each of them and remember them for who they were in life - and how important they were to my family. I don't know why they chose to end their lives, but I did this series of photographs to pay tribute to them and their memory. This project was extremely hard to do these past semesters, but it also started me on a road toward healing. As a Native American photographer I feel that it is important to get this type of work out there and, hopefully, raise awareness and create discussion about suicide"

Strengthening Our Communities: Collaborative Approaches to Prevent Youth Suicide

*Jaime Gaskin Eyrich, Program Development Officer
Center for Lifelong Education, IAIA*

A sobering and disturbing fact of life in Indian Country is a higher-than-average suicide rate among Native youth: a staggering 2.4 times the national average for youth 15-24 years of age. The State of New Mexico is ranked number five in the United States for total suicides. In order to bring further awareness to issues of suicide in New Mexico Pueblos and surrounding communities, a symposium aimed at preventing youth suicide was held at IAIA on August 11-12, 2008.

Approximately one hundred representatives from Pueblo communities, middle and high schools, universities, and medical institutions were in attendance. Along with experts in the fields of youth suicide, destructive behavior prevention, and gang violence/bullying, a powerful presentation by young peer counselors from Pojoaque Valley High School showed us how students can help stem the rising tide of violence and self-inflicted harm. Native behavioral experts and counselors highlighted the power of prayer and traditional healing practices, and the importance of family and community in the well-being of our youth.

PICTURE

*Keahi Kimo Souza
School Social Worker, Native American Community Academy*

PICTURE

*Teresa LaFramboise
College of Education, Stanford University*

The event was sponsored by the Center for Lifelong Education, in collaboration with the NM Department of Health, Office of School & Adolescent Health - Youth Suicide Prevention, and with support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.