

Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Field Hearing  
“H.O.P.E. for the Future: Helping Our People Engage to Protect Our Youth”

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Shalak naii. Dzaa gihshii geenjit shoo ihlii. Vahsraii K’oo gwatsan ihlii.

I give thanks for being invited to share with this Committee and our People. It is humbling to be asked to share my experience and understandings about the tragedy of suicide, which has in some way affected nearly every Alaska Native person today. It is imperative that we proactively address this issue and its related contributing factors with conviction, so I am grateful to help raise awareness in this way. I also give thanks to all those leaders who came before me, breaking trail on this path to healing and wellness, many of whom are still with us today working diligently within their families and communities. It takes great courage and commitment to acknowledge that we have problems and to face them with honesty, love, and determination. We can no longer afford to live in denial about the daunting reality many of our people face on a daily basis. We can no longer afford to live in fear of the consequences if we choose to raise our voices and take a stand.

Within my culture, we speak from personal experience because that is the story we know best. Our stories shape who we are and reflect the learnings we have garnered about life. They also enable us to identify our relationships to one another. Additionally, in order to fully address the complexity of suicide in Alaska Native communities, time must be taken to briefly detail a history of colonization. This history may not initially seem relevant, yet is inextricably connected to the breakdown of the cultural, political, spiritual, and social fabric that sustained Alaska Native peoples for thousands of years prior to western colonization.

Research has shown that colonization is one of the single largest factors driving the abnormally high suicide rates within an Indigenous population (M. Chandler & Proulx, 2006; M. J. Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; L. J. Kirmayer MD, Boothroyd Lucy J., & Hodgins Stephen, 1998; L. Kirmayer, Fletcher, & Boothroyd, 1998; L. J. Kirmayer, Brass, & Tait, 2000; Kral, 2003; Kral, 2009; L. Wexler, 2009; L. Wexler, 2006). Therefore, in order to fully engage in the battle against suicide in Alaska Native communities it is crucial to ask a couple questions: Just what is colonization? And how has the colonization of Alaska impacted Alaska Native populations historically

and in the current time? I will attempt to answer parts of these questions through sharing with you part of my story, how I am here before you today.

I was born to a Gwich'in and Koyukon mother and a Jewish father. I lost my father to divorce when I was five and I did not see him again before he died, for these reasons I was raised as a Gwich'in person from my earliest memories. But my story begins further back; my grandmother was adopted at a young age after losing her parents to disease -- one of several diseases that had caused a great number of deaths among Alaska Native people between 1870 - 1950. As a child, following the adoption, my grandmother was sexually abused by men in her new community and she did not realize until adulthood that this was not a normal part of what childhood was supposed to be. This later weighed heavily on her relationship with my grandfather and their ability to raise my aunts, uncles, and mother in a secure and openly loving way.

My grandparents chose to send my mother away at a very young age to California to receive a better western education. At the time this was highly encouraged and sometimes forced during a time period of federal government policies that is now widely recognized as an era of tribal termination and forced assimilation. It was in this same time period that the territory of Alaska was successfully desegregating; in our own homelands signs that read "no dogs, no Natives" were finally being taken down from business windows. Few of our Alaska Native people were western educated at that time. Stories of the treatment of American Indians in the continental United States made it clear to our leaders that we would need to learn the western ways better to be able to defend our rights to our homelands and to our way of life against a dominant culture that had already shown our people great disregard. My mother was lucky to return to Alaska after only three years and she remained home until leaving again for high school on the east coast of the lower forty-eight.

Like many Alaska Native people of my grandmother and mother's generation, my mother endured the emotional, psychological, spiritual, cultural, and physical duress of a rapid transition from a traditional way of life on the land to the twenty-first century "city life". Federal policy and practices, implemented through schools and some churches, enforced the assimilation of Native peoples through the direct and indirect eradication of rights, language, culture, and philosophy. My mother's generation was born into a world that immediately told her, both in popular culture and in government policies, that she must change.

The policies and practices of colonization brought with it the social illnesses of sexual abuse, alcoholism, and neglect, which can be passed from one generation to the next. This is often referred to as intergenerational trauma, which equates to an experience of post-traumatic stress disorder among many Alaska Native people. In many ways, my mother's generation was born with the scars of assaults carried out in previous generations of our ancestry as the colonizing culture attempted the

eradication of who we are and the undermining of our control over our destiny as a people.

These multiple layers of stress and pain associated with generations of assault, abuse, and loss are all too easily numbed with alcohol and drugs. Yet drugs and alcohol do not heal the pains, they amplify it. Alaska Native communities have seen an epidemic of drug and alcohol abuse, which has resulted in continuations of the cycles of social illness and suicides. My family has not been immune to this; my story, until recently, was not an exception to this cycle.

Shortly after my father left we were living in Anchorage, but my mother felt a calling to send me north to my grandmother in Gwichyaa Zhee (Fort Yukon) and my grandfather in Vashraii K'oo (Arctic Village). She felt it was important that I be raised traditionally among our people -- the reverse of her experience being assimilated into the western ways. The following years, until I was a teenager, I moved from village to village and sometimes back into the urban ghettos of Anchorage, I lived with grandparents, uncles, relatives, and my immediate family. Within those times, I faced hunger, sexual abuse, bullying, neglect, racism, confusion, exposure to heavy alcohol and substance abuse, and suicidal ideation, which started at the age of ten when I once held a knife to my throat for two hours.

Simultaneously, I was immersed in an "Indigenous worldview," I received a traditional education from the land, animals, and people. All of this shaped my understanding of what it means to be Gwich'in, to be human. I had to grow up fast and my grandmother later reflected to me as an adult, that she knew when I was thirteen years old that I was already an independent young man, admittedly one who was unconsciously broken, hurting, and naïve.

It was then that my mother moved my brothers, sister, and I all back together under one roof into the low-income area of Fairbanks. We ate food bank rations and I hunted ptarmigan and rabbits in the willows with my brother near our apartments, until the police told us "no more hunting in the city." My mother had made courageous changes in her life through her own healing process by that time. She began to implant the expectations of success into the minds of us children, and kept our home free of alcohol and drug abuse. There is no one I respect more than my mother, her strength and determination demonstrated to us what was possible in the face of great adversity. She opened the door to this path that I now follow.

It was during this same time that my generation of Alaska Native youth, in particular young men, began to die by suicide at an alarming rate. I remember being brought into a private room at Ryan Jr. High School with about twelve other young Alaska Native boys, where we were lectured by a non-Native about how we were far more statistically likely to go to jail or die by the time we were twenty five years old than to finish high school. It was the early days of behavioral health intervention, with attempts made to scare us into following a different path. Within a year, one of us died by suicide and, over the next six years, only two finished high school. I was not

one of them. The rest of us started to abuse alcohol and drugs during this same time period. Some are still self-medicating their pain and suffering, using alcohol or drugs to make life feel bearable.

I was lucky to survive my teenage years. Then at seventeen years old, I had an epiphany, my consciousness awakened in a new way. I realized that I was not doing okay and neither were many of the Native people around me. I thought about how I would become a father one day, and that I had the power to choose the life path I would walk for my children. I knew that transforming my life would require a great deal of courage because I would need to acknowledge and face my problems. I chose to heal and develop myself as a person so that I could be there for my family, and to be there for my people.

My first steps after finding this clarity were interrelated. I needed to pursue my education, both western and traditionally in my culture, and I had to investigate the history of what our people went through that led us to our current condition. It did not take long for me to find other young Alaska Natives who carried similar interests. Together we began what has become my lifelong work, the pursuit of truth, healing, knowledge, and self-determination among Alaska Native peoples.

The emphasis in my early work was on youth leadership development, with the first gathering hosted over sixteen years ago. As we honed the process and approach to leadership development over the years, we realized early on that a necessary first step towards healing is to create a confidential space, without judgment, for people to share what they had been through in life.

For most it is like being able to breathe freely for the first time, to sit in a safe environment among Alaska Native peers and realize that we are not alone in feeling the pain, pressure, and loss in our generations. To have our feelings affirmed and have people acknowledge that much of what is happening on a social, political, and economic level is not okay and that anger, frustration, confusion, and depression are natural emotional responses to the experiences we are living with as Alaska Natives.

There are natural stages that follow as we deepen our awareness of what our past generations had to endure. We most often feel forgiveness and compassion towards our parents and grandparents as we realize that they too must have suffered tremendously in their lifetimes due to great deaths from epidemics, boarding schools, racism, assimilation, abuse, and other traumatizing circumstances. It is not an excuse for unhealthy or negative behaviors, but it provides for insight into how it came to be.

In sharing our stories with one another in a healthy setting we began the process of re-weaving the social, spiritual, and cultural fabric that once before sustained our peoples. We found support, encouragement, and guidance from each other and began making a commitment to ourselves to no longer live life as a victim, but to face our personal challenges and those of our people as compassionate warriors.

Three years ago leaders from several regions in Alaska asked me to expand the focus of my efforts to the prevention of suicide. Since that time I have worked with a number of “compassionate warriors” to develop approaches to suicide prevention and healing that are rooted in the traditional values, knowledge, and practices of our peoples. And we continue to learn, grow, and make improvements to these approaches. I believe that we have the capacity and the knowledge in our communities to address the issues surrounding suicide, however it requires people in each community to take a stand by cleaning up their own life and then taking the risk to apply healthy pressure within their families and community. In the past, our elders held such a deep personal integrity and respect among the people that they were able to be this healthy foundation for their villages. This is something that we need to return to, but which can only happen if enough people begin to hold themselves to a good self-disciplined path in life.

Research shows that Alaska Native people are much more likely to go to their peers or a family member than to a western-based counselor, therapist, or psychologist when experiencing depression or suicidal ideations {{1517 Wexler,L. 2008; 829 Wexler,L. 2008; 625 Freedenthal,Stacey 2007}}. This makes sense because we know that other Alaska Natives will understand what we are talking about when we express our feelings about the experiences we are having as Alaska Natives. In the past few years, I have listened to the stories and witnessed the pouring of tears from hundreds of Alaska Native youth and young adults. I can attest to the fact that the current level of suffering and pain being felt by Alaska Native people today is staggering.

The path to our recovery will require several factors to be acted upon simultaneously. All are rooted in the need for expanding control over our destiny as Alaska Natives through self-determination. Self-determination is something that we must take upon ourselves to practice as Alaska Natives, but it is also something that the federal and state governments can choose to support or not. This kind of decolonizing process is linked to decreased rates of suicide and substance abuse in tribal communities (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998b; Durie, Milroy, & Hunter, 2009; Fleming & Ledogar, 2008; Kirmayer et al., 1993; Kirmayer & Valaskakis, 2009; Kral & Idlout, in press; Wexler, 2009b; White & Jodoin, 2004).

As Alaska Natives we must step into leadership and responsibility. We must lead by example; ask ourselves if our behaviors and decisions are ones that we would feel good to have our children follow? We must be honest with our families, our community members, and ourselves. We must recognize and acknowledge the problems we have, because that is the first step to addressing them. We must demonstrate the love for our children, family, and people through our actions. The solution is in every one of us, we just have to believe it is possible and then we will make it so. Yet, we must also have patience for ourselves and those around us, because the process of healing takes time.

I believe that you, the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, and the Federal government have a key role in helping build better futures for Alaska Native people. In the late 1990's, I took a trip upriver from Fort Yukon to another Gwich'in village that happens to be in Canada, called Old Crow. While there, I was astonished to see they had running water, electricity, and a solidly recognized tribal government that was well supported by the Canadian government. They were in control of their local school and were in the midst of a decade long treaty negotiation over land, resources, rights, and royalties to developments in their traditional territories.

It was one of the first times I clearly realized that of the billions of dollars annually taken from our traditional lands in Alaska in the form of oil, salmon, mining, and timber, we were still living in third world conditions compared to our cousins upriver. Our tribal governments have never been afforded a treaty negotiation with the United States government. Our people have not truly been afforded the opportunity to decide for ourselves how we would like to best organize ourselves for self-governance and economic development.

Instead, the United States passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) in 1971 as an experiment in modern colonization that has reaped some economic benefit for Alaska Natives, but also a great deal of division, cultural degradation, confusion, and frustration among Alaska Native tribes and people. In addition, ANCSA extinguished our Indigenous rights to hunt and fish despite Alaska Natives being arguably the most dependent of any Indigenous peoples in North America to that way of life.

More directly related to our behavioral health needs, the federal government provides funding through IHS that is restricted to meet behavioral health service standards that were not developed to meet the needs of our people. We may not have all the solutions yet, but there is no doubt that we will be more effective with the freedom to develop and implement our own services based on our intimate understanding of the issues our people are facing {{838 Wexler,L. 2011; 1517 Wexler,L. 2008; 2346 Walters,Karina L. 2009; 1717 Walters,KL 2002; 1593 Duran,E. 1998; 1732 Oetzel,John 2006}}. Lifting the restrictions on federal funding for behavioral health services would lift the burden of administrative time required to meet western standards and enable us to provide more effective services to Alaska Native communities. We would benefit greatly from an expanded autonomy in the use of current and recurring federal and state behavioral health dollars.

Furthermore, I would like to suggest that an equal, if not greater, scale of investment that was put into eradicating our cultures and assimilating Alaska Native peoples into western ways be invested into healing, wellness, and leadership development to help us recover.

There are a great many factors that lead into the number of suicides in Native communities such as high unemployment rates, lack of adequate housing, and limited control over our educational systems that are failing our children at an

alarming rate. As representatives of our Federal government you have a great opportunity and responsibility to ensure initiatives that usher greater self-determination for Alaska Native peoples so that we may further enhance our work towards a holistic healing and recovery of our people.

Thank you for this opportunity to share from my experience and I wish you all the best in your life and work.

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