

**SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS OVERSIGHT HEARING  
“H.O.P.E for the Future: Helping Our People Engage to Protect Our Youth.”**

**Saturday October 22, 2011  
1:00 PM – Dena’ina Civic & Convention Center**

**Written Testimony of Megan Gregory**

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The honorable Chairman Akaka, Senator Murkowski, and Members of the Committee. I would like to express my deep appreciation for inviting me to testify before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Oversight Hearing on “H.O.P.E for the Future: Helping our People Engage to Protect Our Youth.” I would like to thank you for holding this important hearing and inviting me to testify before this Committee to share my vision for a healthy and successful future for all Native youth.

Suicide in Indian Country is a significant behavioral health issue affecting Alaska Natives and American Indians (AN/AI). The suicide rates for AN/AI’s are even more alarming than the rates for the general population, at 1.7 times higher than the U.S. rate for all races and ages. It is the second leading cause of death for Indian youth between the ages of 15 to 24 (3.5 times higher than the national average). Alaska Natives die by suicide at rates four times the national average. For Alaska Native males, the suicide rate is six times higher than the national average, with teen suicide rates almost as high—nearly six times the rate of non-Native teens. AN/AI males ages 15-24 are at highest risk for suicide completion. The group at the highest risk for suicide attempts is females of the same ages. This indicates the prevalence of the same troubling risk factors in the lives of young Natives—drug and alcohol use, violence, trauma, abuse, and depression and other mental illness. In addition, young people between ages 15-24 make up 40% of all suicide deaths in Indian Country.

These high suicide rates cause our society to reel with devastation in our families and our communities. We have a great deal of work ahead of us, because all Alaskans deserve a better life. We as Alaska Natives and American Indians need to work together to keep building prosperity on those good things, and build on the wonderful people that make Alaska and Indian Country such a beautiful place to live.

I believe providing more youth leadership roles is an important step to help prevent suicide in Alaska. I was fortunate to participate in various leadership roles that have lead me to work in my community, my region, state, and eventually at the national level. In 2005, I was fortunate to intern for Senator Lisa Murkowki in Washington, D.C. for four weeks. It was my first experience spending time on the east coast, and her internship inspired me to stay involved in Alaska politically. In 2009, I had the opportunity to serve as the inaugural Youth Advisor for Sealaska Corporation, and in 2010 I served as the Youth Representative for the Central Council Tlingit & Haida Executive Council. Both positions offered one year terms. The Youth Advisor/Representative opportunities offered a chance for restorative reflection on the meaning of life and leadership. They provided me a strong foundation for an exceptionally bright future.

Central Council Tlingit and Haida encourages all Youth Representatives to attend the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) Conferences. I always looked forward to NCAI, and was fortunate to attend the NCAI Tribal Leader Summit. Through this opportunity I learned about Senator Dorgan's plan to establish the Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute, which is a policy program dedicated to combating the challenges facing Native American Youth. After hearing about the Center for Native American Youth I contacted many people trying to obtain further information about how I could get involved, Senator Dorgan heard about my involvement with suicide prevention in Alaska and asked me to serve as a Youth Board Member. All of these opportunities have developed my mission to foster enlightened leadership, open-minded dialogue, and to encourage more youth to get involved in their communities at an early age. As a result these programs will potentially lead to more youth involvement at the state level. I firmly believe that every Tribe, Native Organization, and Native Corporation should offer a youth representative position to the youth in their community to keep them engaged and educated about what is happening. More leadership roles for youth will instill hope and confidence, and suicide rates will start to drop dramatically.

As the Central Council Tlingit & Haida Youth Representative I joined the Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium (SEARHC) 1 is 2 Many Suicide Prevention Task Force in early 2010. As the youngest member of the task force, it became quite apparent that we needed to engage more youth to be a part of the solution in our efforts to prevent suicide. Reflecting on my experiences I was inspired to create the Youth Ambassador Program to offer opportunity and exposure to high school students throughout Southeast Alaska. The task force endorsed the Youth Ambassador Program in January 2011, and SEARHC hired me to implement the program in February 2011. Through this program students will have the opportunity to attend meetings, work with a member of the task force as their mentor, and encourage them to be strong positive advocates in their community.

The Youth Ambassador Program was officially launched this August, and there are currently six inaugural Youth Ambassadors representing Southeast Alaska. Teressa Baldwin originally from Kotzebue represents Sitka because she attends Mt. Edgecumbe High School and is also the current State Suicide Prevention Council Youth Representative, Shante Hudson represents Metlakatla, Patricia Jackson represents Petersburg, Jamie Paddock represents Juneau, Anthony Edenshaw represents Hydaburg, and Naomi Huestis represents Thorne Bay. We would like to see representation from every community. We are working to highlight the opportunities the program offers to encourage more youth to get involved. SEARHC is currently working to locate grant money to fund the program in future years. This year, we have been seeking financial support from the schools, tribes, and corporations in Southeast to help make the program a success this first year.

I have recently joined the University of Alaska-Fairbanks Cooperative Extension Service Advisory Council to take a more active role in learning about horticulture and the 4H Program throughout the state of Alaska. One of my main goals is to incorporate community gardening in the Youth Ambassador Program. It is time we get back to our roots, and I am convinced community gardening is a solution to many of the problems that currently challenge Alaska Natives and American Indians. We must look at all aspects to prevent suicide and promote a healthier way of life. Please keep in mind at nearly 17%, American Indians and Alaska Natives have the highest age adjusted prevalence of diabetes among all U.S. racial and ethnic groups.

The Youth Ambassadors are going to take the lead on advocating for their school to have a green house for a garden to serve the fruits and vegetables grown at lunch throughout the school year. Eventually it is my hope that this initiative will encourage every household to start their own garden. Gardening will benefit the residents of all communities because it is a healthy activity. It promotes positive social interaction, provides possible economic growth, and encourages people to eat more fruits and vegetables which will lead to a healthier diet. Many communities in rural Alaska receive their produce by barge, selection is limited, cost is outrageous, and less nutritious alternatives are often more affordable. Unfortunately the affordable alternatives lead to obesity, poor self image, lower self-esteem, and poor health. It is time to promote sustainability and resilience through community gardening opportunities. I believe that the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs should work with all housing authorities to incorporate green houses and areas to grow gardens with every new home that is built to encourage people to start their own vegetable gardens. I hope you will work with me to promote community gardening throughout all of Alaska. A healthier body leads to a healthier mind.

Next, I would like to emphasize the importance of utilizing the media to promote suicide prevention throughout Indian country. I am very impressed by the Montana Meth Project and their research-messaging campaign. The messaging campaign graphically portrays the ravages of meth through television, radio, billboards, and internet ads. It has gained nationwide attention for its uncompromising approach and demonstrated impact. As of today, the Montana Meth Project has expanded into Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, and Wyoming. In 2005 Montana was ranked #5 in the nation for meth abuse, and now ranks #39. Teen meth use has declined by 63%, and adult meth use has declined by 72% in Montana. I hope that the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs uses this example to take the same approach to engage the media in spreading suicide prevention awareness and volunteerism. Volunteerism is becoming prevalent with the youth, and if we could encourage people to dedicate a few hours of their time every week to a good cause we would start to see a lot more progress in Alaska.

I am interested not only in the prevention of suicide, but also in enhancing the participants skills while developing new ones, and continuing to expand an established network of youth leaders. Bringing suicide prevention awareness to the youth populations is dependent on targeting youth that are already positive role models. We need to create an environment where we can hone the present abilities of these strong youth leaders as well as teach them new skills. This will develop an active network of youth leaders. An example of such an established network is the program Youth Leaders also known as Natural Helpers. The leaders are anonymously chosen by their peers through a secret ballot. The end result was a variety of students from overachievers to dope-smokers to bullies, which proves that leadership can be taken seriously when youth become an integral part of the solution.

I believe the Youth Ambassador Program will influence the youth alongside the Natural Helpers Program. I would like to see the Natural Helpers Program expand into every rural community. I will advocate the Youth Ambassador Program to be implemented in all eighteen communities in my region, and I would eventually like to see the program utilized statewide through the State Suicide Prevention Council. The Council could select two Youth Ambassadors from every region in Alaska to work with the council members the same way the Southeast Alaska Youth Ambassadors are working with the 1 is 2 Many Task Force. This would result in a total of twelve

Youth Ambassadors working with the Council, and I believe this would help to keep the Council members more engaged with what is happening in all six regions.

It is also important to encourage exercise at an early age. Last spring I volunteered as a head coach for the international program called Girls on the Run. The goal of Girls on the Run is to empower girls ages 8-14 to find strength, courage, self-respect from within, and learn how to draw upon these attributes as they face the challenges of adolescence and adulthood. This program instills self-esteem and self-respect through physical training, health education, life skills development, and mentoring relationships. In Juneau, the Aiding Women in Abuse and Rape Emergencies (AWARE) Shelter is also working on developing a similar program for boy's ages 8-14 called Let Us Run. I am going to work with the Youth Ambassadors to ensure their schools offer these programs in southeast. The programs are free after school programs for any student that would like to participate, and it is important we make these programs available in communities in need of afterschool programs. Today AWARE receives a limited amount of grant money for Girls on the Run to train coaches, and provide supplies to every school in southeast. Another way AWARE raises money for Girls on the Run is through a program called Solemates. During my time as a Girls on the Run coach I also decided to become a Solemate. The way Solemates works is the Girls on the Run Program provides a fundraiser website through active.com for you to encourage your family, friends, and colleagues to submit their donations to. On this website you can share information about the race you're training for, share photos, and people can make donations. The website will also list how much money you have collected, and how much more you need to reach your goal. I found that volunteering my time as a coach, dedicating my time and energy to raise money, and training for a half-marathon was life changing for me. I connected with youth in a way I had never experienced before, I was determined to run consistently all summer since I was committed to a half-marathon, and I raised awareness about an amazing after school program.

Exercise creates balance and can be therapeutic. It's a healthy stress reliever, and it keeps the mind sharp and the body in shape. Even after I finished the race I signed up for as a Solemate, I was inspired to keep running. Volunteering my time helped me to realize just how fast and far I was capable of running, and how good it felt. At the end of the summer I ran 14 miles for the Klondike Road Relay, and just recently ran another half-marathon a few weeks ago. An extremely inspirational person to me is Dirk Whitebreast who is also a fellow board member for the Center for Native American Youth. In 2003, Dirk suffered the loss of his 18 year old sister, Darcy Jo Keahna, to suicide. To cope with the loss of his sibling Dirk became a runner to become a healthy and strong leader for his family, tribe and community. Dirk decided to share his experience and promote running with Native youth by running 10 marathons in one month to raise money for the Center for Native American Youth. Dirk did this to honor his sister and promote healthy living to the Native American community. He wanted to set an example for commitment, motivation, hard work and leadership for all Native American Youth. Dirk recently finished running his tenth marathon this month. Dirks 262 mile challenge is a symbol of strength and endurance for all Alaska Native and American Indians. Dirk did a phenomenal job raising awareness about suicide prevention, and creating hope for Native youth.

Self-sufficiency and personal integrity must be restored to our people. It is time we give Natives a hand up, and not a hand out. Providing more leadership roles will encourage Natives to become a part of the solution leading to healthier lifestyles, diets, exercise and a well rounded society.

Please work with me to achieve all of these goals! Let us encourage our youth to strive and succeed in every way possible, through this course of work, we will watch them become more enlightened in their work and enriched in their lives. Chairman Akaka and the committee, I am grateful for the opportunity to testify. Thank you for allowing me to present testimony on our efforts to promote suicide prevention today.