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MEMORANDUM

June 30, 2015

TO: Tribal Health Clients

FROM: Hobbs, Straus, Dean & Walker, LLP

Re: *Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Holds Hearing on “Demanding an End to Native Youth Suicides”*

On June 24, 2015, the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs held a hearing entitled “Demanding an End to Native Youth Suicides.” The hearing focused on recent spikes in Native youth suicides as well as searching for steps that could be taken to address the problem over the longer-term. The Committee heard testimony from Acting Director for the Indian Health Service (IHS) Robert McSwain, Oglala Sioux Tribe Councilman Collins “C.J.” Clifford, Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians Chairman Darrell G. Seki, Sr., and Stanford Professor Dr. Teresa D. LaFromboise. The witnesses’ written testimony is attached along with written testimony submitted by the National Indian Health Board.

The hearing record will be open until July 8, 2015; please let us know if you would like assistance in preparing comments.

Senators’ Statements

Chairman John Barrasso (R-WY) opened the hearing by noting that it was the Committee’s sixth hearing dedicated to Native youth suicides in the past 10 years but that the problem remains. He reported that suicide is the second leading cause of death for Native youth ages 15 to 24 and that the Native youth suicide rate is 2.5 times the national average. Chairman Barrasso voiced concern over the recent suicides on the Pine Ridge Reservation while noting that many communities across Indian Country are facing similar tragedies. He also expressed concern that the Administration’s reaction to these suicides has been insufficient, stating that he would not “stand idly by” and that the “Committee will do whatever it takes legislatively and in its oversight capacity to support results.”

Vice Chairman Jon Tester (D-MT) stated that Native youth suicide remains an epidemic and that children in Indian Country “face dreadful realities,” suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at the same rates as veterans returning from wars in

Iraq and Afghanistan. He highlighted poor reservation living conditions and stressed the importance of sustained funding and the role of Native culture and language.

Senator Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND) stated that this is not a new issue and expressed frustration that stories that should shock the nation's conscience are not widely disseminated. She stressed the need for action and welcomed testimony regarding best practices for addressing Native youth suicides.

Senator Tom Udall (D-NM) reported that New Mexico has suffered 201 Native youth suicides from 1999-2013 and has also experienced clusters on the Mescalero Apache Reservation and the eastern portion of the Navajo Nation. He stated that in a survey of 1300 Native Americans from seven tribal communities in New Mexico, researchers found that 29% had been exposed to 4 or more traumatic experiences as children. Senator Udall stressed the need to listen to Native youth, remove the stigma surrounding mental health issues and treatment, and create and sustain opportunities for learning and affirming the value of Native cultures and identities.

Senator Al Franken (D-MN) spoke passionately about the issue, stating "[w]e can't depend on children to solve this themselves. We are the grown-ups here, we are the Indian Affairs Committee, and we are supposed to fight for funding for you because which other of our colleagues will do that if not us?" He challenged the Committee to fight for Native children.

Senators Maria Cantwell (D-WA), Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), Steve Daines (R-MT), and Jerry Moran (R-KS) were also in attendance.

Witness Testimony

Acting Director McSwain stressed that IHS generally responds immediately when tribes request assistance to address suicide clusters, giving the recent deployment of IHS staff to the Pine Ridge Reservation and use of tele-behavioral health services as examples. He highlighted the Methamphetamine and Suicide Prevention Initiative (MSPI), Domestic Violence Prevention Initiative, and announced that this year IHS will launch the Zero Suicide Initiative, which will train IHS clinic staff to identify at-risk youth. Mr. McSwain also announced that IHS would be moving forward with creating a Pathways Internship Program that would hire Native youth to work for IHS.

Councilman Clifford testified on behalf of Oglala Sioux President Steele, who was ill. He reported that since December, 14 youth on the Pine Ridge Reservation have taken their lives, 176 have attempted suicide, and 229 more have been treated for suicidal ideas with a suicide plan and intent to carry it out. He reported that in February 2015, President Steele declared a state of emergency on the Reservation due to the high incidence of youth suicide. He discussed the need to combat the hopelessness caused by high poverty rates, low graduation rates, and low life expectancy. Councilman Clifford also related a story of a mass suicide plan that was stopped when a youth pastor heard of

the plan. He stressed the need for resources to get out in front of the current epidemic and to develop a long-term solution. Councilman Clifford made several suggestions, including encouraging the Secretaries of the Interior and Health and Human Services to go to Pine Ridge for a Native Youth Suicide Prevention Summit; the creation of a Native Youth Suicide Prevention Task Force; and the establishment of school-based clinics.

Chairman Seki reported that Red Lake, like Pine Ridge, has suffered high rates of suicide and suicide attempts. He stated that after the mass shooting the tribe suffered in 2005, President Bush said that Red Lake would not be forgotten but that that promise has not endured. Chairman Seki stated that counselors save lives but that because of staff reductions as a result of sequestration there are not enough counselors. He explained that although IHS will treat the immediate crisis, they often do not have the resources to perform essential follow-up care. He stressed the need to restore the sense of community and stated that Red Lake was chosen as one of four tribes to participate in the BIA's Tiwahe Initiative, which focuses on addressing underlying causes of poverty, domestic violence, and suicide. Chairman Seki called sequestration "a nightmare" and also called on Congress to provide sustained funding rather than constraining tribes with short-term grants.

Dr. LaFramboise discussed her work with the Zuni Pueblo to help develop a culturally grounded youth suicide prevention curriculum, which she later developed into the American Indian Life Skills (AILS) curriculum. She reported that AILS is community-driven and focuses on a school-based approach that exposes all students to suicide awareness information and suicide prevention skills. Dr. LaFramboise said that AILS curriculum focuses on treating suicide as an action and behavior rather than a mental illness and is tailored to the tribe's culture prior to implementation.

In their comments and questions, the Senators discussed the problems that Native youth live with and the need to find a starting point to address the suicide crisis. Senator Daines stressed the role of unemployment and the need for culturally sensitive programs; Senator Murkowski also discussed the need for culturally based interventions and of gathering solutions from the young people themselves; Senator Heitkamp discussed the role of trauma and stress; Senator Udall emphasized the need for identifying the first steps in responding to suicide clusters; Senator Franken apologized for the lack of follow through, stressing the need for the Committee to inform the rest of Congress about these issues; and Senator Barrasso highlighted the need for interagency communication and coordination and the need for IHS to produce results in working toward the goal of zero Native suicides. The Senators also discussed the need for school construction and maintenance; long-term funding; and economic development and employment opportunities.

Conclusion

If you would like assistance preparing a statement to the Committee or would like any further information, please contact Elliott Milhollin (emilhollin@hobbsstrauss.com) or

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