

Indian nations fighting the scourge of suicide among their youth

By Seattle Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.06.13

SEATTLE - Suicide looms over Indian Country, claiming more lives of native youth than those in any other population. And not only in Washington state, but nationally.

State Department of Health statistics released this month show that in Washington, the rate of suicide among native youth from 10 to 24 years old was more than double the rate of any other ethnic group.

Tribes are fighting back.

At the Lummi Nation, tribal leaders last year improved a long-standing social services program to prevent young suicides. The Colville, Spokane and Yakama tribes also are using prevention grants and training through the Native Aspirations Program. The Spokane-based program for the past five years has helped 65 tribes across the country combat suicide, the second-biggest killer of native youth, after accidents.

That might even be an undercount, experts say.

"The car accident, the gun death, the overdose, there are a lot of suicides that are not reported as such," said Victoria Wagner, executive director of the Youth Suicide Prevention Program. The Seattle-based program has outreach workers across the state working with schools and parent groups to teach the warning signs of suicide and prevention strategies.

In Indian Country, there are many problems that increase the risks of youth suicide, Wagner said. Poverty, isolation, lack of adequate resources to treat mental health problems, substance abuse and family turmoil are some of the reasons she listed. "There is this feeling of being trapped, and having nowhere to go."

Positives Over Negatives

At a recent prevention training session at the Lummi Youth Academy outside Bellingham, the emphasis was on the positive.

"How do we make life less to do with pain, and more to do with beauty?" asked executive director Shasta Cano-Martin. Two youth coaches led the kids in writing lists of things that built their self-esteem - and root causes that could lead to risky behavior.

"No support," offered one teenager. "Feeling like you don't belong," said another. "Abuse," said another. "Failure," came a tiny voice from a child who seemed too young to know the feeling, but clearly did. But the kids were quick, too, with long lists of things that lead to feelings of self-worth and confidence: Succeeding on tests. Nailing a basket on the court. Hugs. Doing something nice for someone else. Sobriety. Having the urge to try, and succeeding beyond expectations.

Familiar Struggles

Kyla Frajman, 21, said suicide was no stranger to her. "I thought about it a lot, but always fought my way through it," said Frajman, a member of the Cowichan First Nation in British Columbia. "I don't do it myself," she said of suicide, "because I don't want the younger kids to think it's allowed."

But she has a friend she knows is going through a rough patch. "When I don't hear from him, I worry about it."

Experts who track the problem of native youth suicide fear it will get worse. A budget fight in Washington has triggered automatic spending cuts called sequestration. The cuts have reduced funding for mental health services for Indian people, which were already scarce to begin with.

A National Emergency

Indian Health Services is the major federal program that provides funding for health care services for tribes. Today it covers only about 52 percent of the needed care, and mental- health needs account for more than a third of the underfunding, said Erin Bailey, director of the Center for Native American Youth.

As in Washington, the suicide rate among native youth nationally is 2-1/2 times that of any other youth population, Bailey said. "It is definitely a national problem, a national emergency," Bailey said. "This is weighing especially hard on our hearts at this time, with native communities facing cuts for native health care."

Patricia Whitefoot, director of Indian Education for the Toppenish School District, said suicide prevention is a top priority identified by parents of students at Toppenish High School in Yakima County. Native students embarked on a wellness walk last Friday to emphasize the positive role that culture can play in this, she said. It's just one step in what will have to be a longer journey, she said. "Teachers are so busy paying attention to test scores, how much time is there for addressing these major health issues in our community? And, as teachers, that has not been their training."

No Longer Taboo

At the Yakama Nation, Vanessa Smartlowit, administrative assistant in the tribe's behavioral-health department, said the tribe is seeking to bolster its youth with everything from motivational speakers to dealing with bullying in schools. Even simple things - talking circles, bead-working classes and cultural activities - "just something for them to learn and keep busy," can help, she said.

Taboo no longer, suicide is a danger that has to be talked about, Wagner said. "You are not planting the idea," Wagner said. "It is already there."