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GENERAL MEMORANDUM 09-114

7th Generation Promise: Indian Youth Suicide Prevention Act of 2009

On August 6, 2009, Senator Dorgan (D-ND) introduced S 1635, 7th Generation Promise: Indian Youth Suicide Act of 2009, which was referred to the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. The introduction of S 1635 was preceded by an Indian Affairs Committee hearing on youth suicide in Indian Country on February 27, 2009.

S 1635 is a revised version of a bill from the 110th Congress, S 322, the Indian Youth Telemental Health Demonstration Project Act of 2007. S 1635 would broaden one of the grant eligibility requirements from being an emphasis on serving Alaska Native areas to tribal areas with a documented disproportionately high rate of suicide. Other changes include encouragement for tribes to obtain the services of predoctoral psychiatry and psychology interns and a provision that would give tribes priority consideration for Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) grants.

Suicide is a wide spread problem in Indian Country. The Findings section of S 1635 cites statistics regarding suicide in Indian Country and the FY 2009 IHS Budget Justification notes that suicide among American Indians and Alaska Natives in the IHS service area is three times higher than the national average.

IHS Demonstration Project Grants

S 1635 seeks to address some of the specific challenges of reaching out to at risk Indian youth by:

- Establishing an Indian youth telemental health demonstration project with a grant award process that emphasizes approving grants for areas where Indian youths are most at risk
- Encouraging the development of culturally appropriate educational materials and allowing for the implementation of traditional healthcare practices to be covered by grant money
- Strengthening organizations which currently work to combat Indian youth suicide

Telemedicine is a recently growing field which puts doctors in contact with their patients by way of video conferencing, exchange of still pictures, charts, and medical information over internet and phone lines. There has been a surge in telemedicine's

popularity as internet speed and connectivity have increased and video conferencing equipment has come down in price.

Telepsychiatry, a branch of telemedicine, has shown particular promise for soldiers in war zones, patients in rural areas and inmates in prisons where the psychologist or psychiatrist cannot be physically present to administer consistent care.

For the Indian Youth Telemental Health Demonstration Project, the bill would authorize \$1.5 million each fiscal year from FY 2010 through FY 2013 for up to five grant recipients. The grant period would be four years. To be eligible to receive these grants, tribes or tribal organizations must operate one or more facilities that are:

- Located in an area with documented disproportionately high rates of suicide
- Reporting active clinical telehealth capabilities OR
- Offering school-based telemental health services to Indian youth

Priority consideration would be given to Indian tribes and tribal organizations that:

- Serve a particular community or geographic area where there is a demonstrated need to address Indian youth suicide
- Enter into collaborative partnerships with IHS or other tribal health programs
- Serve an isolated community or geographic area that has limited or no access to behavioral health services
- Operate a detention facility where Indian youth are detained

After the grant period ends for the demonstration project and a final report is submitted, there will be an evaluation period to determine whether the project should be:

- Expanded to provide more than five grants
- Designated as a permanent program
- Expanded to include urban Indian organizations

SAMHSA Grants Access

S 1635 would expand tribal access to existing Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration grants. Section 5 (a)(2)(B) states:

"... the Secretary shall give priority consideration to the applications of Indian tribes or tribal organizations with documented high suicide rates, regardless of whether those Indian tribes or tribal organizations possess adequate personnel or infrastructure to fulfill all applicable requirements of the relevant program."

Use of Predoctoral Psychology and Psychiatry Interns

Finally, the bill would direct the Secretary to encourage Indian tribes and tribal organizations to obtain the services of predoctoral psychology and psychiatry interns for purposes of recruitment and retention and to increase the quantity of patients served.

There will be another Senate Committee on Indian Affairs hearing on Indian youth suicide prevention on September 10, 2009.

Please let us know if we may provide additional information regarding the 7th Generation Promise: Indian Youth Suicide Act of 2009.

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