

**UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF THE UNITED STATES**

July 16, 2020

Legislative Hearing to Receive Testimony on Native Youth Perspectives on Mental Health and Wellness

Supplementary Testimony by Gloria O’Neill, Chair, Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children in response to testimony presented at the July 16, 2020 Hearing

Chairman Gallego and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide supplemental testimony on the topic of mental health and healing as it relates to Native youth on behalf of the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children. The Commission is charged with conducting a comprehensive study on the programs, grants, and supports available for Native children, both at government agencies and on the ground in Native communities, with the goal of developing a sustainable system that delivers wrap-around services to Native children. The Commission will examine the unique challenges Native children face and make recommendations on improving the current system by building on the strengths and leadership of Native communities.

We appreciate Chairman Gallego and the Committee’s understanding and concern for the topics addressed by the testimonies of four Native youths which mirror those of the Commission and are consistent with the goal of the Commission’s work. The testimony provided by Marco Ovando, Letitia Gonzales, Cheyenne Kippenberger, and Robert “Scottie” Miller reflects the critical nature of this issue within Native communities and demonstrates the urgent need for accessible mental health care for youth on reservations and in rural and urban Native communities. We also appreciate the interest of Chairman Gallego and the Committee in improving mental health services in Indian Country and their willingness to take the time to listen to those most affected, our youth.

Mental health issues linked to intergenerational trauma are not uncommon in Native communities, and the need for community-based and culturally-informed healing processes, especially where the effects of intergenerational trauma are concerned, cannot be emphasized enough. Furthermore, mental health care providers in Indian Country need to understand not only historical trauma, but cultural differences and ways of healing to ensure that the healing process has a component of cultural connection in order to fully support mental wellness. However, the healing process is hindered by the lack of mental health resources and care available in Indian Country; for some communities, there are no accessible mental health resources. Building tribal capacity with programs and resources doing work in Native communities is essential to develop and implement the programs that will incorporate culture and address mental health issues in the most effective way. Given the diversity of Native communities, both urban and rural, and reservations, it is important to remember that each will have their own needs and best practices for addressing the challenges in their communities.

- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the inaccessibility of mental health resources has become even more prevalent. The negative mental effects of social distancing measures disparately affect Native youth. The lack of in-person socializing is keeping youths from seeing their friends, extended family members, and the support of community cultural activities that have been put on hold or cancelled. While face-to-face interactions have decreased for safety reasons, this has led to a decline in mental health. In regard to the use of digital platforms for social and educational purposes, it is important to note that not all communities have reliable broadband service, which makes staying connected more difficult. The increasing use of telehealth coupled with broadband issues in rural Native communities and reservations have posed challenges for not only healthcare, but also mental health services. Expanding broadband services in these communities is essential for community connectedness and the delivery of resources across Indian Country to provide the care that Native youth not only need, but deserve.
- Mental health support should be made more readily available in academic institutions in order to provide more comprehensive aid in all aspects of a child's life. Trauma can occur to children at any age, and so appropriate mental health resources and programs need to be ready to provide services from early childhood onwards. Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools have behavioral health resources for their students, which should work in collaboration with other mental health services for consistent care. Mental health support in schools is a practice which should be expanded and offered to all Native youth in their academic endeavors, whether kindergarten through 12th grade, vocational training, or secondary schooling. Supporting mental health in educational settings is a critical tool to decrease the achievement gap. Education surrounding mental health should also be increased in order to lessen the stigma surrounding mental health and finding support.
- It is important to note the mental health considerations when Native youth interact with the justice system. Victimization, domestic violence, and substance use can result in interactions with the justice system in which Native youth will need mental health support.
- The Department of Health and Human Services oversees many different administrations, offices, and programs that interact with Native youth. For example, the Administration for Children and Families has several offices which are focused on the wellbeing of children and the issues of trauma as they affect the mental of children and families, but there is little coordination between the programs, even if they are serving the same communities. The existing silo structure for programs can be improved through communication and collaboration between existing administration, offices, and programs; Native communities and their youths would benefit from coordinated efforts between government programs to ensure care and support is provided in effective ways.
- Refining and implementing the most supportive healing processes is contingent on research and data on Native communities and their available resources. However, more accurate research is necessary. The current lack of research makes it difficult to comprehensively support communities; in order to fully understand the level of need, accurate statistics are necessary not only to know the most pressing community-specific

needs, but to direct funding and other resources in ways that are most effective for these challenges facing Native youth today.

- Mental health factors include suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, etc., which can be results of unresolved intergenerational trauma; all of these factors should be taken into consideration and respectfully researched so that programs and resources can be distributed accordingly.
- Without accurate research and data, these components of mental health will perpetuate and make it even more difficult for the healing process to take place.

Conclusion

The focus of the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children is the health and wellbeing of Native children. **Increasing funding is also critical to address the escalated needs of Native communities due to the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.** The challenge is to align the multiple agencies and departments serving Native youth, break down silos, and coordinate ways in which they can collaborate in order to best serve Native youths through a wide, but cohesive array of programs. The government programs and resources that are in place need to be fully funded and include flexibilities and tribal setasides so that culturally-informed and community-specific practices can be put in place. More research needs to be conducted so that the care being provided is supportive of the mental health of Native youth and more effective in treating, educating, and providing them with resources so they can not only heal, but thrive. Increasing efforts to understand not only community cultures, but their historical traumas will yield more positive results. It is vital that we support the mental health of Native youth disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond as they and their communities heal from intergenerational trauma and other factors which negatively affect mental health. We need to support our most vulnerable populations and ensure that Native youth, the stewards of our future, have access to mental health resources so that they can heal and overcome the challenges they face in a manner that aligns with their cultures and communities.