



SEP 9 2003

Dear Tribal Leader:

I am announcing an Indian Health Service (IHS) initiative to address the tragedy of suicide in our American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities. Suicide and its aftermath have long been neglected, and it is time to take action to ensure the health and well-being of future generations.

Most of us are all too familiar with the high rates of death by suicide in AI/AN communities. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for AI/AN youth in the 15-24 age group. Suicide is the fifth leading cause of death for males and the seventh leading cause of death for females. The loss of family members reverberates throughout our communities, putting other family members at risk for depression, grief reactions, poor work performance, drug and alcohol use, and domestic violence as well as for the contemplation of suicide themselves.

Fortunately, the groundwork for this effort has already been laid through other national initiatives. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has sponsored the development of a document titled, "The National Strategy for Suicide Prevention." This document reflects the efforts of all HHS agencies in the development of 11 goals and objectives for the Nation to reduce suicidal behavior and its consequences. We can build on the foundation in the HHS strategy while ensuring that we honor and respect our people's traditions and practices.

An interim committee formed at the July 2003 IHS National Behavioral Health Conference has been tasked with setting up the structure for this initiative. This committee will be responsible for reviewing and approving nominations for membership on an advisory committee, which will include representatives from across Indian Country and the IHS. You will hear from the interim committee soon on how the initiative will be implemented and the role you will be invited to Play.

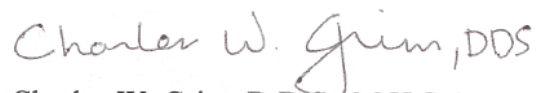
To support this initiative, the IHS is finalizing the implementation of a suicide information management system that will give us more and better data about the circumstances and contributors to suicide among our people. The system will help you gain more understanding about when, where, why, and who suicide affects in your community and give the programs you support the information needed to respond. This information also will help us to advocate strongly for the support and intervention necessary to reduce the number of suicides, and to identify training needs and service and prevention activities. It will help us decide where we may need to prioritize our efforts to stem the tide of suicide among our people and, as we meet the challenge of suicide prevention, enable us to better identify our funding needs.

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Combining these efforts with the insight of the families affected, knowledge of health care providers and other healers in our communities, and wisdom of leaders and advocates such as yourself gives us the opportunity to heal our people and communities, and provide a safe and nurturing future for our children. Working together, we can heal together.

If you have questions about this initiative, please contact Marlene EchoHawk, Ph.D., Health Science Administrator, at (301) 443-2038. I call on all of you to continue providing the leadership that will enable the Indian health system to prevail in this landmark effort.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Charles W. Grim, DDS".

Charles W. Grim, D.D.S., M.H.S.A.
Assistant Surgeon General
Director