

Recommendations to the National Commission on Native Children

Thank you for inviting me to present on the panel for Health, Mental Health and Behavioral Health.

First of all I wanted to address the comment on the dramatic decrease in suicide during the years from 2010 through 2014. There are a number of factors that contributed to this decline. Our region has the Northwest Arctic Leadership Team, who meet regularly to plan and respond to things that are happening in our region. The members are leadership from the NANA Regional Corporation, the Northwest Arctic Borough, Maniilaq Association, and the Northwest Arctic Borough School District. Our leadership, through NWALT, prioritized suicide prevention during the years leading up to 2010. Without this partnership between our leadership, our region probably would not have seen much improvement in this problem.

Teck Cominco, the company that operates the Red Dog mine for NANA Regional, contributed a huge amount of funds over the years to the Northwest Arctic Borough Youth Leaders Program. Basically we are teaching our youth tribal sovereignty. During the youth leader retreats we tell them they are the elders and leaders in their school so they are responsible for everything that goes on at school and in their communities. They are given knowledge and skills to prevent bullying, how to foster a good school climate, how to build healthy relationships, and how to respond to their peers to help prevent suicide. I have told the Youth Leaders over the years that they have done what no one else could do- they have stopped the downward spiral our region was facing. I believe the largest credit for the decrease in youth suicide in our region goes to the Youth Leaders in our schools. This program was developed with NWALT planning and support.

My predecessor at the Maniilaq Wellness Program, Evon Peter, helped foster a partnership with the Bering Straits Region. That partnership continues between Kawerak, Norton Sound Health Corporation, Maniilaq Association, Bering Straits School District, NWAB School District. The Northern Alaska Wellness Initiative partnership is the only grantee that has received multiple Garrett Lee Smith grants. By joining forces we were able to compete better for funds.

So my major recommendations are 1-to foster partnerships and collaboration and 2- promote self-determination and sovereignty. All of our agencies provide services to the same population so we all should be working together to promote wellness and healing. And grassroots solutions are most likely to make lasting change- every village is different in our region so what might work in one village might not in another. Tribes have to be free to adapt and change programs to suit their unique needs.

I also wanted to expand more on the questions I responded to regarding the RHS program. I fully support this pipeline from entry level certification to the Associates degree to the Bachelors In Social Work program at UAF and onward to the Masters of Social Work at UAA. Rural Human Services program teaches basic counseling skills and has participants dive deep into their own healing and wellness during that week long intensive. The first session is on historical and intergenerational trauma and cross cultural competency. You learn to help people through grief and healing by addressing your own trauma and grief in another week long session. The RHS model works best when there about 20 participants in a cohort that meet once a month during the fall and spring semesters over 2 years. Not very many regions can keep that number of participants over time, so like our region they have to send participants to Anchorage or Fairbanks. I believe if our funding was expanded to cover not just employees but substance abuse clients and at risk youth we would be able to reach the optimal level of participants in

most regions and those who need that week of healing and support could learn and grow along with our entry level counselors and service providers.

I would also like to expand on the PCCARES model. Some of the first facilitators that were trained in our region and hosted learning circles in their communities had some awesome feedback. They appreciated that the model was focused on helping communities come up with their own ideas for solutions. And one of the things most requested when asked what we should do in the future was to expand it from Suicide Prevention to things like Parenting and Healthy Families, Domestic Violence prevention because they realized that so many problems later in life stem from those early years of childhood. If the commission would like an in depth look at PCCARES my staff and our research partners could give an expanded presentation and run a sample learning circle.

The other recommendation is meeting youth where they are at. We saw a spike in our region in 2018 and developed the We Need You social media campaign with ads with photos from our region and tips on how to help someone you care about that is struggling. These ads ran on different platforms like snapchat, insta, facebook, youtube. The ads also had links to resources like the Maniilaq suicide prevention webpage and crisis line numbers. With funding from GCI we were able to print a resource guide to hand out in our service area. The main message of the campaign to youth was we need you to be here and reach out for help when it's needed. The campaign aimed at adults was everyone has a part in suicide prevention in our region and we all have the power to make a positive difference. Social media is where our youth spend a lot of time so we need to be tech savvy and utilize this opportunity to spread our message where the youth are at online.

Once again thank you for spending time visiting Alaska and learning about our unique situation and hosting a listening session on solutions we are working towards.