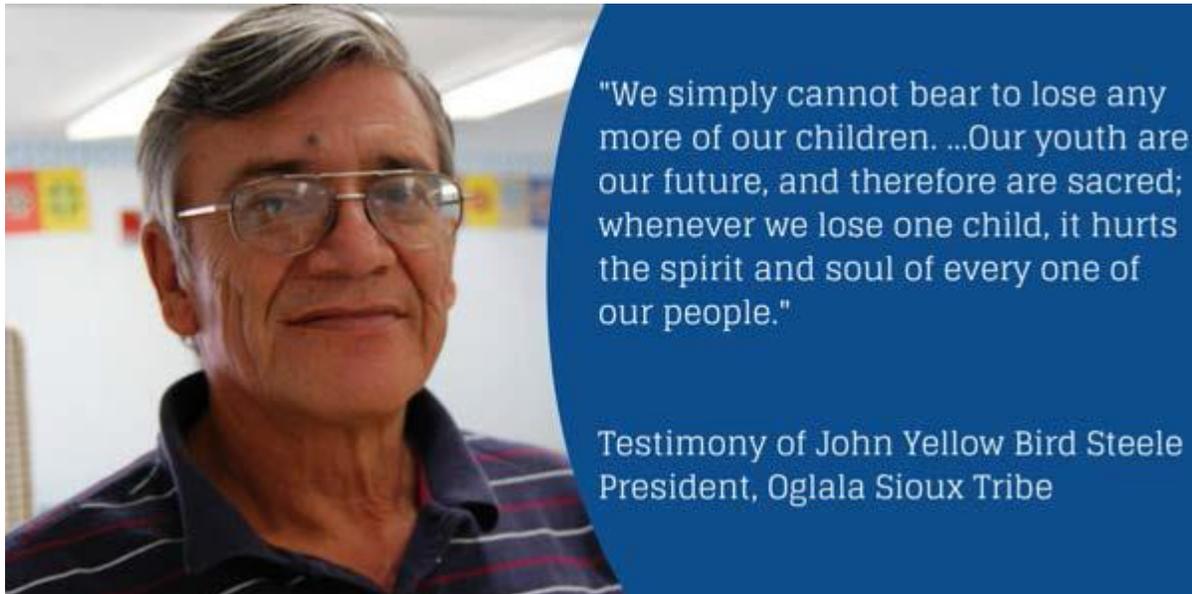


Excerpt from:

## Native American Legislative Update: July 2015

---



### Youth Suicide on the Rise in Indian Country

On June 24, [2015] the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs held a hearing on Native Youth suicides. Witnesses included representatives of the Indian Health Service, a Stanford professor who had developed an effective youth suicide prevention program with the Zuni Pueblo in New Mexico, and a representative of the Oglala Sioux. The witnesses laid out devastating statistics, deeply moving stories, and recommendations for a path forward.

C.J. Clifford, a councilmember of the Oglala Sioux Tribal Council, delivered testimony for the tribe in place of President John Yellow Bird Steele, who had fallen ill. Clifford updated President Steele's written testimony to note that, since the week before Christmas, the tribe has now lost fourteen young people on the Pine Ridge Reservation to suicide.

In addition, President Steele's written testimony reported that "At least another 176 of our youth attempted it in that period...and [the Indian Health Service] treated 229 more with suicidal ideation with plans and intent to carry it out. The Tribe's Sweetgrass Suicide Prevention Project made contact with 276 of our youth exhibiting suicidal behaviors. We simply cannot bear to lose any more of our children...They are the future of our Tribe."

With twice the national rate of youth suicides occurring in Indian Country, Steele assessed the resources that Pine Ridge Reservation has available to intervene. With 40,000 members residing on the reservation, Steele counted “just a handful of mental health professionals.” School counselors are overwhelmed, and not every school has access to a counselor.

The real story, Steele’s testimony underlined, is the lack of hope that the young people experience. “There are many factors that contribute to our youth’s despair,” he wrote. “Our real unemployment is more than 75 percent, our schools’ dropout rate is over 60 percent, and our per capita income is below \$7,000 a year. ... Worse, our people look around the reservation and see neglect by the United States, our trustee and treaty partner, whose obligations to honor its promises is not minimized by its past failure to do so. The institutions that others in the country can look to for fairness, pride, and investment are sources of disappointment and oppression for Indian people. These are the kind of obstacles we face.”

Youth suicide is a stark indicator of the failure of the federal government to meet its trust responsibility. Even the modest increases that President Obama proposed in some parts of the budget are far too small to make a difference. Steele laid out the math: Increases for Indian Health Service would mean fewer than two more admissions to a hospital per tribe next year; three more outpatient visits to a clinic per month per tribe. Housing funds were available for 30 to 40 housing units a year, where ten times that many are needed. “We talk about numbers here in Washington,” Steele observed, “but in Pine Ridge, these are people. If they cannot access the services they need and that they deserve, it makes it all the much harder to convince them that they are a priority and have value.”

Youth suicides show us all what “no hope” looks like. What Steele asked of Congress was a commitment to sustained investment in Indian Country to support a reason for hope.