

Testimony of Kenny Smoker Jr.
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My name is Kenny Smoker Jr., the Director of the Fort Peck Tribes' HPDP program located on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in Poplar, Montana. I have been a long time employee in health care systems on the Fort Peck Reservation and have collaborated with several tribes across Montana to improve health care for all people on reservations.

Montana has been at or near the top in the nation for the rate of suicide for nearly four decades. From January 1, 2014 to March 1, 2016 there were 556 suicides in Montana. The number of veterans that died by suicide during this time was 42, of which 8 were American Indians. Nationally 18% of suicides are veterans. In Montana, 22% of suicides are veterans. In Montana, 19% of suicides are American Indian Veterans.

Some of the challenges Montana tribal veterans face as it relates to mental health are:

- Access to health care and mental health services
- Addressing on-going Substance Abuse issues - 56% of American Indian suicide completions had alcohol in their system
- Lack of individual drive to seek care due to depression

The VA can do to better with local communities and providers to enhance access to these critical services by implementing a few key strategies:

- Supporting Tribal Veteran Centers:
 - Support an Army of VISTA's to assist communities in building capacity for local Tribal Veteran's Representatives alongside community professional and natural support in order to provide outreach and assistance for veterans to access needed services such as face to face mental health provider encounters, transportation, and developing camaraderie groups to safely engage other veterans in shared experiences
 - Increase access to tele-psychiatry and other health services
 - Support wraparound services to empower individuals to seek care, utilizing the Social Determinates of Health concept
 - Increase peer to peer supports to build capacity for seeking and accessing care by veterans
- Increase support for Tribal Veteran's Representatives
- Increase communication and collaboration between Tribal, State and Federal programs to engage all veterans in rural and tribal areas from within their own cultural context in order to serve them better- a culturally matched transition from soldier to veteran
- Give Veterans a "Sense of Purpose"
- Assessing the right fit for employment opportunities

Resources:

Montana Strategic Suicide Prevention Plan - <http://dphhs.mt.gov/suicideprevention>