Empowering American Indian Boys to a Healthy Mind, Body, and Spirit



The greater Oklahoma City (OKC) area is home to one of the largest Native American populations in the country. As the tribal public health authority tasked with promoting health and reducing illness for this population, the Southern Plains Tribal Health Board–Oklahoma Area Tribal Epidemiology Center (SPTHB) recognizes the need for tailored efforts that work with the rich cultural traditions of over 43 distinct tribes. In recognition of the overlapping challenges faced by this community, from scars of historic trauma to modern experiences of disproportionate poverty, SPTHB is leading the OKC Making Connections coalition to focus on one of the starkest issues: suicide. Native Americans commit suicide at the highest rate of any racial or ethnic group in the United States. In OKC, Native men are five times more likely to end their own lives than Native women.

Community members tell a story of resilience and tradition. Before oppressive policies tore families apart and impacted social conditions like housing and education, Native men had clear roles and pride in their tribes. According to the National Health Interview Survey, Native American men experience the highest level of psychological distress related to feeling "hopeless" and "worthless." SPTHB, in partnership with local schools, health care facilities, suicide prevention experts, and Native American fathers, brothers, and sons, identified a need to build off the individual support already being provided to those at risk of harming themselves. Advocates and members of the Native population knew that strengthening community connections and changing mental health stigma was what they needed.

The Making Connections coalition partnered with Hope Squad, a national, school-based suicide prevention program that fosters positive school and community environments by training students to take leadership roles centered on mental wellbeing. Anadarko Public Schools, 50 miles southwest of the capital, engage youth at three schools—elementary, middle, and high—to recognize warning signs of suicide and build a supportive network for those affected. Prioritizing student mental health constitutes systems change—an organizational shift that demonstrates a unified effort to address suicide as a community issue, not just an individual issue.

Making Connections Project Manager Susan Gay believes "we need to be connected to each other, interact with each other, and listen to each other. People need to know that they can get through a hard patch by opening up to someone they trust and seeking help." Hand in

hand with the systems change comes a more elusive shift: norms change. The same health survey that illuminates the high levels of psychological distress experienced by Native American men also shows a troublingly low rate of health service underutilization. Teaching Native American boys and their peers to talk openly about their experiences isn't just changing behaviors, it is changing a generation.