



# Department of Public Health and Human Services

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Steve Bullock, Governor

Richard H. Opper,  
Director

April 8, 2016

Senator Jonathan Windy Boy  
Chairman  
State Tribal Relations Committee  
PO Box 201706  
Helena MT 59620-1706

Re: **American Indian Youth Suicide Prevention Appropriation**

Dear Chairman Windy Boy:

Thank you for your letter of March 24, 2016 on behalf of the State Tribal Relations Interim Legislative Committee in which you requested that the Department reconsider our approach on how the American Indian Youth Suicide Prevention funds are invested.

For far too long Montana has held a top five spot nationally in regards to suicide rates. Governor Bullock recognized that when he requested funds in his budget to begin focusing on reducing suicides among American Indian youth. Once the appropriation was made by the 2015 Legislature, the Department of Public Health and Human Services began to work methodically towards its implementation. I agree with you that it will take a multifaceted approach to address the high rates of suicide across the State of Montana, including Indian Country.

As shared with you during the Department's update to the State Tribal Relations Committee on March 23, 2016 in Box Elder, the Department made a significant effort to seek guidance through feedback, ideas and comments in several different arenas over the past several months. That effort has included visits by me and several of my staff to all eight tribal governing bodies at their tribal headquarters, many one-on-one conversations with key tribal government and health department representatives, a formal tribal consultation, and additional opportunities for our partners to provide comments verbally and in writing. This extensive consultation was very valuable to us and we are grateful for the many tribal and urban representatives who engaged with the Department to assist our efforts in getting to this point.

Although comments varied widely and there was not a unanimous decision, what did emerge was a desire to not only involve and engage youth but to use this unique opportunity to work toward a foundational change utilizing a strategic approach. We believe our approach to investing the funding honors the extensive feedback we received from our partners and will

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complement the work that is already being done in tribal communities. We have confidence that the local level will be included with the involvement of tribal and urban representatives who will be a part of the coalition. We have also built in some flexibility in that once the strategic plan is developed, implementation could include direct grants to tribes and urban organizations.

Although it is our intention to implement as originally planned, I appreciate the committee's strong interest in this very important issue and am encouraged by your support for addressing our American Indian youth suicide reduction efforts.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Richard H. Opper", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Richard H. Opper, Director  
Montana DPHHS