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Indian Health Service Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Suicide Prevention Week - May 4 -10, 2003 IHS encourages knowing the warning signs

National Suicide Awareness Week is May 4-10. Every year more than 800 American Indians and Alaska Natives end their own lives. During the period of 1997-99, the suicide death rate for American Indians and Alaska Natives was nearly twice that for other Americans. This week individuals are encouraged to become more familiar with the warning signs of suicide.

"This is also a week to acknowledge the many Indian Health Service (IHS) and tribal mental health workers whose dedication and intervention have helped to save lives and help surviving family members cope with the untimely loss of a loved one," stated Dr. Charles W. Grim, Interim Director of the IHS. "Suicide is a tragedy that requires a community wide effort to eliminate. It must be addressed by community leaders, families, and health professionals in many different ways, from being alert to signs of depression that can lead to suicide attempts to establishing programs and activities for self-development."

Suicide is the 8th leading cause of death for all American Indians and Alaska Natives. It is the 5th leading cause of death for Indian males. Tragically, it is the 2nd leading cause of death for American Indians and Alaska Natives between the ages of 15 and 24.

"The number of completed suicides is not a full indication of the problem for the entire United States population," said John Spaulding, Phoenix Area IHS Mental Health Consultant. "For every completed suicide, the National Institute of Mental Health estimates that in 2003 there are 8 to 25 people who make an attempt to die by suicide. Suicide was declared a national public health problem in 1999 by the Surgeon General. He issued a Call to Action, which has developed into a National Strategy for Suicide Prevention. The many IHS and tribal mental health workers - psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and mental health technicians, are bringing this national strategy to Indian Country every day."

In addition to the 11 goals contained in the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention (available at <http://www.mentalhealth.org/suicideprevention/>), there are specific efforts and projects underway to help prevent suicide, from national efforts to local efforts. Some examples to help prevent suicide include the IHS Behavioral Health Reporting System, developed to track fatal and non-fatal death by suicide data on a national scale; involvement in statewide efforts like the Arizona Suicide Prevention Coalition, which helped develop a state-wide prevention plan and media campaign; and the community efforts of the White Mountain Apache Suicide Prevention Task Force, which tracks high-risk individuals and works to decrease death by suicide across the reservation.

Information for teens and parents on suicide risk factors like depression and substance abuse; warning signs that a person is thinking of death by suicide; and action steps for suicide prevention and intervention can be found at: ForReal: (TEENS) <http://www.forreal.org/know/suicide.asp>; and Reality Check: (PARENTS) <http://www.ncadi.samhsa.gov/reality/articles/2003/suicide.asp>. Other resources for more information about suicide prevention are available from the Suicide Prevention Action Network US (<http://www.spansua.org>). In addition, how death by suicide is covered by the media can affect the rate of suicide attempts. The guidelines for media reporting of death by suicide are also instructive on how suicide can be discussed in general conversation. Information is available at: <http://www.afsp.org/education/newrecommendations.htm>.



NOTICE TO EDITORS: For additional information on this subject, please contact the IHS Public Affairs Office at 301-443-3593. Additional information about the IHS is available on the IHS website <http://www.ihs.gov> and <http://info.ihs.gov>

