16 year-old tells of losing her 14 year-old sister:

Senate committee told Indian youth suicide is still urgent, pressing crisis

WASHINGTON, D.C. Youth suicide in Indian Country is an urgent and pressing crisis, despite new prevention initiatives launched three years ago, experts and family members touched by the crisis told the U.S. Senate Indian Affairs Committee Thursday. More resources and better strategies for reaching troubled Indian youth are required they said.

The hearing, called by Chairman Byron Dorgan (D-ND), examined the crisis and sought to assess how the Indian youth suicide prevention programs are working. Health experts said those programs are helping, but more resources and some new strategies are required.

American Indians and Alaska Natives have the highest suicide rates in the United States – 70 percent higher than the general population. American Indian and Alaska Native youths have the highest rate of suicide of any group in the nation.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who lost his father to suicide when he was a young boy, was among those who testified at the hearing. It's important to break the silence about suicide, too often a taboo subject, and to talk openly about it, he said.

Also testifying was Dana Jetty, a 16 year old high school student from Fort Totten, North Dakota. Jetty, a member of the Spirit Lake Tribe, Dakota Nation, told the committee about losing her 14 year old sister, Jami, to suicide in November. She noted that her mother was concerned about Jami's well-being, and "did everything right." Her mother took her sister to doctors, counselors, and had her evaluated. All diagnosed her as a "typical teenager." In November, Jami, took her own life.

Health experts agreed more health care professionals need to be available in Indian communities to help troubled Indian youth cope with their problems and receive mental health treatment in the community. Senator Dorgan noted that "forty percent of Indian health care needs go unmet" because of a lack of funding, something he called "shameful."

"We need to go back and read the treaties that signed the federal government up for its obligations," to provide health care to Native Americans, he said. "Right now, health care rationing takes place on every Indian reservation in America. That is shameful."