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APA Highlights Mental Health and Suicide Prevention During National American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month

Arlington, Va. – In recognition of National American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) is highlighting the critical need for comprehensive mental health services and suicide prevention programs for these minority groups, especially for children and teenagers. More than half of all people who die by suicide in Indian communities have never been seen by a mental health professional, indicating serious problems with access to care.

“We could save lives simply by directing more attention to various mental health issues in the American Indian and Alaska Native communities,” said Daniel Dickerson, D.O., chair of APA’s Committee of American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian Psychiatrists. “Across remote Indian reservations and Alaskan villages, urgent improvements are needed in suicide prevention programs, post-trauma counseling services, and community preparedness in response to suicides.”

For the past 20 years, suicide has been the second leading cause of death for 15- to 24-year-old Indian youths. The suicide rate for this age group is 37 per 100,000, as compared to 11 per 100,000 for the general U.S. population. Sadly, suicide is often the result of missed opportunities to treat such problems as depression, alcohol and substance abuse, child abuse, and domestic violence – all common but treatable concerns in Native American communities.

The Indian Health Service (IHS) has identified alcohol and substance abuse, in addition to suicide, as the most significant health problems affecting American Indians. American Indians and Alaska Natives die of alcoholism at a 517 percent higher rate than other Americans. Ninety-five percent of American Indians are reported to be affected either directly or indirectly by alcohol abuse.

The issue of American Indian and Alaska Native mental health was underscored in the spring of 2006 by the APA and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) when the two organizations issued a joint statement to the Senate Indian Affairs Committee for a hearing.

For more information about American Indian and Alaska Native mental health needs, visit

www.HealthyMinds.org.

About National American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month:

What began at the turn of the century as an effort to secure one day of recognition for the significant contributions the first Americans made to the United States has resulted in the month of November being designated for that purpose. For more information on the annual observance, visit <http://www.ihs.gov/PublicAffairs/Heritage/index.cfm>.

About the American Psychiatric Association:

The American Psychiatric Association is a national medical specialty society whose more than 37,000 physician members specialize in diagnosis, treatment, prevention and research of mental illnesses including substance use disorders. Visit the APA at www.psych.org and www.HealthyMinds.org.

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