



Engaging Indian Country, Serving Our Warriors

2015 Executive Summary Report

from the Department of Veterans Affairs

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Office of Tribal Government Relations



Office of
Tribal Government
Relations

Abbreviations, Terms, and Definitions

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| CBO | Veterans Health Administration Chief Business Office |
| HUD-VASH | Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing, a supportive case management and housing voucher program to assist homeless Veterans |
| HVRP | Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program |
| IHS | Indian Health Service |
| MOU | Memorandum of Understanding |
| NADL | Native American Direct Loan program |
| ORH | Veterans Health Administration's Office of Rural Health |
| OTGR | VA Office of Tribal Government Relations |
| PTSD | Post-traumatic stress disorder, a mental disorder related to exposure to trauma, with diagnostic criteria defined in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) |
| Stand down | An event for homeless Veterans, typically coordinated between local VA facilities and other government and community agencies, to provide screening, outreach, and referrals to services and community resources |
| Sweat lodge | A building used to conduct American Indian traditional ceremonial and healing steam baths, often accompanied by songs, prayer, or other ceremonial elements |
| VA | Department of Veterans Affairs |
| VBA | Veterans Benefits Administration |
| VHA | Veterans Health Administration |



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Summary Report

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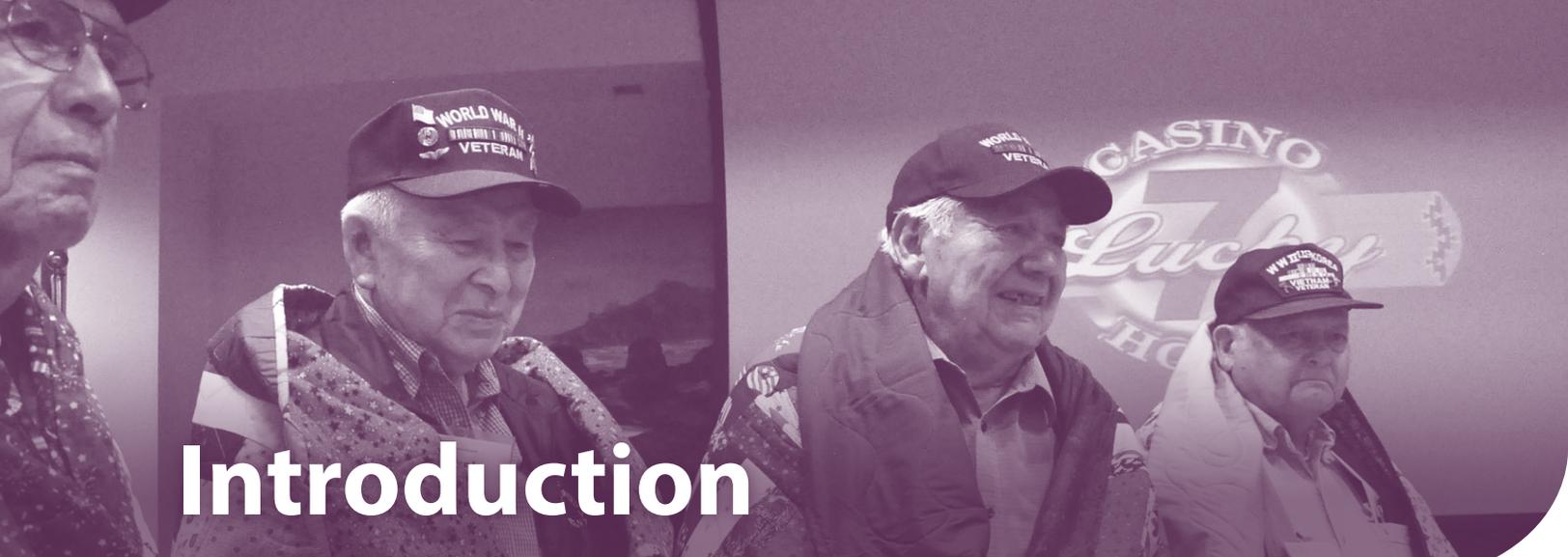
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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Connecting with Tribes and Veterans | 3 |
| MyVA | 3 |
| Outreach and Events in Indian Country | 5 |
| Center for Minority Veterans | 8 |
| OTGR National Newsletter | 8 |
| Facilitating Tribal Consultation | 11 |
| Implementing Community Care for Veterans | 11 |
| Supporting Access to Health Care | 13 |
| VA-IHS MOU | 13 |
| Other Health Initiatives | 18 |
| Cultural Competency in Delivering Health Care | 20 |
| Promoting Benefits and Services | 25 |
| Native American Direct Loan Program | 25 |
| Helping Homeless Veterans | 26 |
| Memorial Services | 28 |
| Veterans Courts | 30 |
| Conclusion | 33 |





Introduction

WWII Veterans Receiving Quilts of Valor at Tolowa Di'Nee Nation Veterans Training Summit

The Department of Defense knows that American Indians and Alaska Natives serve in the U.S. military at higher rates than any other race, yet they are underrepresented among the Veterans who access the services and benefits they have earned. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is working to engage Indian Country, build strong relationships with tribal governments, and increase the number of American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans who access VA programs, benefits, and services—all to better serve the warriors of Indian Country who have given so much to our Nation.

VA's Office of Tribal Government Relations (OTGR) has a special responsibility to oversee tribal consultation and support VA's commitment to honor government-to-government relationships with tribes. OTGR works to engage tribes and strengthen VA's ability to work with tribal governments by building trust, sharing information, and continuing to expand services to American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans.

VA has three goals in serving Veterans across Indian Country, expressed in the OTGR mission statement:

- Facilitate VA's Tribal Consultation Policy
- Facilitate increased access to health care
- Promote economic sustainability, including facilitating opportunities for Veterans to access fiscal, educational, and housing benefits and special programs through VA

This report describes how VA engaged with Indian Country in 2015.



The Tribal Veterans Representatives training conference in Salem, OR, was a groundbreaking collaboration between VA, our State Department of Veterans Affairs, and tribal and community service providers. Regional tribes were invited, but word spread and tribes came from as far away as Arizona and Alaska, showing the need for events like these. The Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs was proud to partner with VA through the Office of Tribal Government Relations, and we believe that these events will impact the welfare of our tribal Veterans and their families by increasing their knowledge of Federal and state VA benefits.

– Mitch Sparks, Director, Statewide Veterans Services, Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs



Terry Bentley, OTGR Regional Specialist, and WA Tribal Veterans Representatives



Connecting with Tribes and Veterans

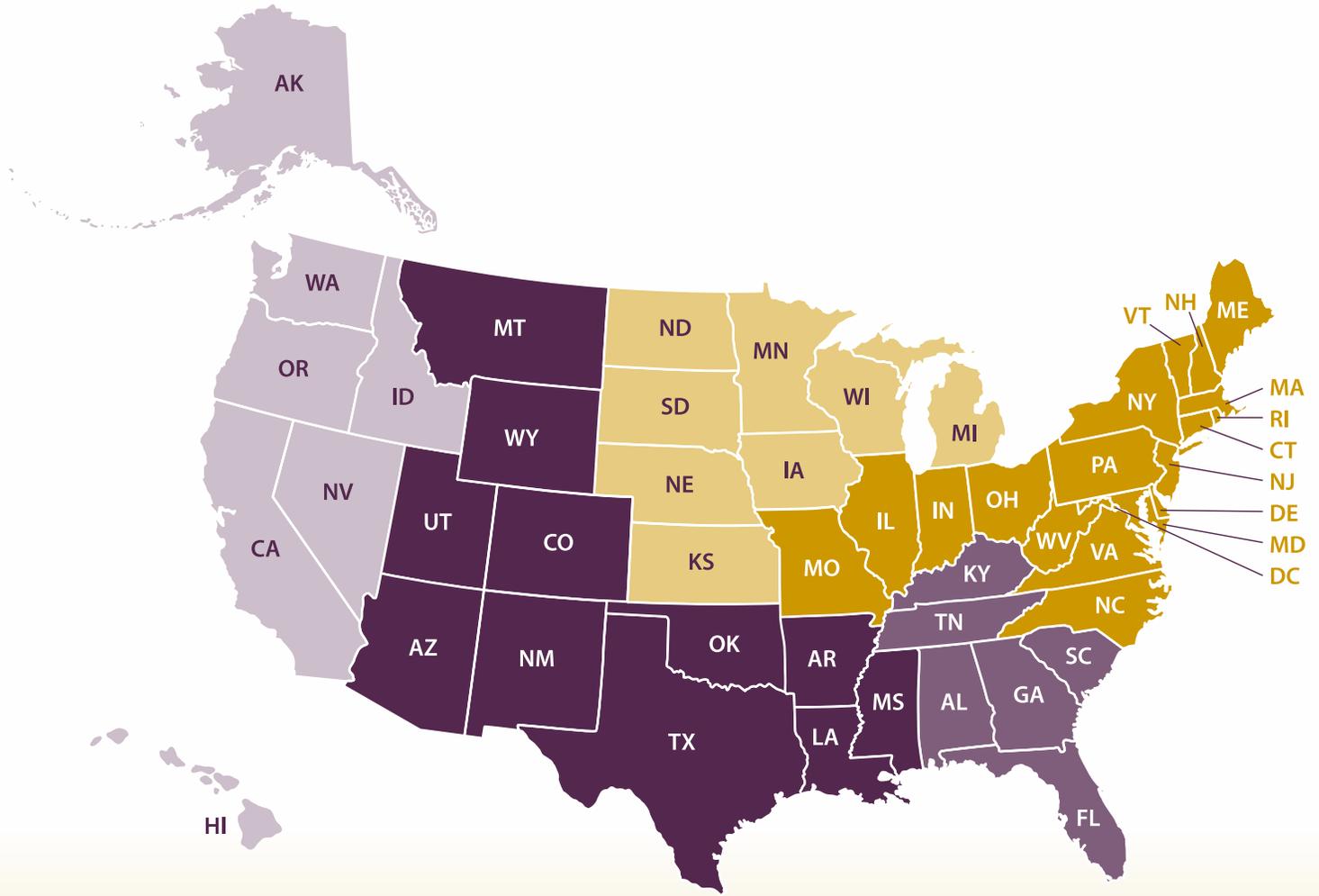
Veterans Training Summit at Swinomish Indian Tribal Community

Many VA programs and activities touch Native communities and Veterans. VA communicates with tribes about policies, programs, and services on an ongoing basis. VA also supports cooperation between tribes and state and community Veterans Service Organizations. During 2015, VA worked to raise awareness of resources available to American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans and to enhance VA's relationship with tribal governments, Native Veterans, and those who work with Veterans in Indian Country.

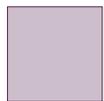
MyVA

MyVA is a reorganization of VA, designed to deliver high-quality services and make it easier for Veterans to access the care they need. It will also give Veterans, Servicemembers, families, and communities more ways to voice their opinions and connect with VA. MyVA's goal is to modernize VA and transform the current way of doing business to one that puts Veterans in control of how, when, and where they wish to be served. As part of the reorganization, the boundaries of VA districts have shifted, as shown in the map on the next page.

Within these new districts, **MyVA community engagement boards** are local boards that bring together resources for Veterans. The boards may be new organizations created by VA representatives, Veterans, and other stakeholders at the local level, or they may be existing Veterans groups that VA collaborates with. As of 2015, there are **30 MyVA community engagement boards** (12 of which are working with preexisting Veterans groups), and VA is working with 40 more communities to adopt this model.



MyVA District Alignment



Pacific District



Continental District



Midwest District



North Atlantic District



Southeast District



As MyVA community engagement boards are established across the country, they will be a place where tribal leaders, tribal Veterans advocates, and Native Veterans can connect, give input, and stay informed about resources in their local communities.

To learn more about MyVA and community engagement boards, visit va.gov/nace/myVA/index.asp or email myvacommunities@va.gov with questions.

Outreach and Events in Indian Country

As the office responsible for facilitating VA's relationships with tribal governments, OTGR helps VA programs and offices work more effectively with tribal populations. An important part of OTGR's work is to support VA's three branches: the Veterans Health Administration, the Veterans Benefits Administration, and the National Cemetery Administration. OTGR shares information about the services and programs in the three branches and helps them connect with Veterans and tribal governments in Indian Country. By conducting proactive outreach and building strong relationships, OTGR helps all of VA connect more effectively with Indian Country and helps Native Veterans learn about and access services and benefits. To conduct its outreach, awareness, and relationship-building activities in 2015, OTGR used formal and informal methods, including the activities described below.

During 2015, OTGR conducted **site visits** in every MyVA district, with representatives traveling to meet with dozens of tribal governments and tribal organizations. Some site visits were part of general outreach efforts to raise awareness of VA programs and resources available to American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans. Some site visits focused on specific issues and collaborations. A particularly important site visit was VA Secretary Robert A. McDonald's visit to Alaska in August 2015 (see collage on page 7).

OTGR and the Department of Veterans Affairs have been wonderful partners to Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board in addressing the needs of our American Indian Veterans.

- **Joe Finkbonner (Lummi Nation), Executive Director of Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board**
-

Veterans training summits are designed to promote collaboration, education, and networking among tribal leaders, Veterans, Veterans representatives, tribal health directors, and state and Federal partners who work with American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans. In 2015, OTGR completed their 22nd and 23rd Veterans training summits in Indian Country since the office was founded in 2011.

OTGR also planned and hosted **benefits fairs** to offer informational booths to assist guests with questions about VA services and benefits. **Town hall events** provided face-to-face interaction between VA representatives and Veterans, family members, and tribal leaders.

Finally, OTGR staff and other VA representatives offered **presentations** on benefits and services for Veterans at conferences and meetings at major Indian Country events such as National Congress of American Indians meetings, regional events such as Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians conventions and United Tribes of Michigan meetings, and local tribal and intertribal gatherings.

In all of these activities, OTGR staff works to build strong relationships with tribal governments in their regions, to help VA programs reach out to Indian Country, and to connect meaningfully with Native Veterans and supply information on services and benefits available to them.

Clockwise from left:

1. Secretary McDonald presents flag to family of deceased Alaska Territorial Guard Veteran **2.** OTGR Regional Specialist Terry Bentley and Secretary's Assistant Heidi Marston with 60-foot whale jawbone at Point Hope Cemetery **3.** VA Secretary Robert McDonald and OTGR Regional Specialist Terry Bentley **4.** VA Secretary with Alaska Territorial Guard family members **5.** Luncheon to honor Alaska Territorial Guard members in Kotzebue, AK



VA Secretary McDonald Visits Alaska

In August 2015, VA Secretary Robert A. McDonald traveled to Alaska, where he visited Anchorage, Kotzebue, and Point Hope and attended the Alaska Native Health Board “Mega Meeting.” Secretary McDonald met with representatives from:

- Alaska Native Health Board
- Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium
- Alaska Federation of Natives
- Southcentral Foundation
- Maniilaq Health Center in Kotzebue
- North Slope County Health Clinic in Point Hope

Secretary McDonald heard about the challenges that Alaska Native Veterans face in receiving VA benefits in remote environments and saw how Alaska tribal health programs provide outstanding culturally competent medical care closer to Veterans’ homes. Tribal leaders and Native Veterans reminded him about the importance of reimbursement agreements between the Alaska VA Health Care System and Alaska tribal health programs.



Center for Minority Veterans

The Center for Minority Veterans (the Center) advocates for the needs of minority Veterans to ensure that they receive equal treatment regardless of race, origin, religion, or gender. The Center was created in 1994, and the Center Director serves as the principal advisor to Secretary McDonald on policies and programs that affect Veterans who are minorities. The Director is assisted by the Advisory Committee on Minority Veterans, a group of appointed members that meets at least twice each year and makes recommendations on how VA can provide health care, benefits, and memorial services to minority Veterans in the most equitable way possible. The Advisory Committee normally includes American Indian and Alaska Native representation among its members. In 2015, the Advisory Committee's chairman was an American Indian Veteran.

Along with Center staff who are headquartered in Washington, DC, the Center also includes a nationwide network of approximately 250 Minority Veteran Program Coordinators. These coordinators are stationed at regional offices, national cemeteries, and at every VA medical center across the country.

In 2015, the American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans Liaison from the Center traveled to national Indian Country events across the country, conducting outreach, leading sessions, and supporting the Veteran-focused activities of these national Indian organizations.

OTGR National Newsletter

Each month, OTGR staff compiles a newsletter and sends it by email to recipients across the country. The newsletter reaches over a thousand Native Veterans and people who work with Veterans in Indian Country. The newsletter can be downloaded from OTGR's webpage at va.gov/tribalgovernment



Government



VA

Mescalero Apache Tribe's Agreement Opens Doors

Here's an article by OTGR's very own Stephanie Urdwell in our official blog VA on a Point. It can be accessed [here](#).



Pictured in the previous image above: Michael J. Frush, from left, Director of Service for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), signs a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between VA and the Mescalero Apache Tribe of the Mescalero Apache Reservation, New Mexico on April 13. Mescalero Apache Tribe Vice President, Robert Gabe Aguilar, back left, and Kelly Starr, back right, Education and Veterans Director, watch as the signing takes place. Mr. Aguilar and Mr. Starr are both Veterans.



"Home is a broad term evoking a variety of very personal and at times emotional responses. Our Veterans have defended our "home" through their service. Missing home makes us "home sick." The thought of "home" can make us reflect on a range of settings, whether it be our country, state, town or tribe. Home is also the dwelling where we "hang our hat" at the end of the day (as the saying goes). It's where we eat, rest, laugh, cry, raise our families and create memories. Home as a dwelling is often purchased with a mortgage product. For some, that home, has been just out of reach.

Mescalero Apache tribal members have a rich and courageous legacy of service in the armed forces. Veterans from Mescalero live all across the United States, but many Mescalero Apache warriors return home to the 463,000 acre

3



Mescalero Apache Reservation nestled in the mountains of south central New Mexico approximately 40 miles from Holloman Air Force Base and 120 miles west of El Paso, Texas.

... living away from their tribal home community of Mescalero who wish to own a home, the dream of home ownership may be eligible for the conventional mortgage. However, what are the mortgage options available to Veterans who choose to return home to Mescalero, where the land is held in trust by the United States government, and Individual Veterans don't hold title to the land? The answer to this question has been years in the making.

"... there was a Resolution set in place 10-01 for the late Dr. Carleton Ralche-Palmer administration, passed 8-0 for the VA Home Loans to be here on the Mescalero Apache Reservation. With the thought and feeling that this would mean more homes for Veterans here in Mescalero. It was passed and sent off to the [VA]."

On April 14, 2015, tribal and VA officials came together to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Mescalero Apache Tribe, which opens doors for VA to make home loans directly to Veterans living on trust lands located in Mescalero. The Native American Direct Loan (NADL) Program provides direct home loans from VA to eligible Native American Veterans to finance the purchase, construction or improvement of homes on Federal Trust Land, or to refinance a prior NADL loan to reduce the interest rate.



The MOUs between the tribal government and the VA are a critical first step towards making VA NADL mortgages available to Veterans living in Indian Country. We are pleased with recent progress in establishing new NADL MOUs; most recently, MOUs between the VA and the Northern Ute Tribe (located in Utah) and the Prairie Band Potawatomi (located in Kansas) were signed last month, and plans are in the works to establish many more in the days ahead.

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It is important that we have consultations and collaboration with all American Indian tribes, wherever they are. We must continue to be vigilant and demand that the most underserved Veterans in this country are served equally.

- Larry Townsend, Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina, Co-chair of National Congress of American Indians Veterans Committee*
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National Indian Health Board Annual Consumer Conference



Facilitating Tribal Consultation

Officials from VA, Navajo Nation, and Arizona State Visiting Chinle Indian Hospital

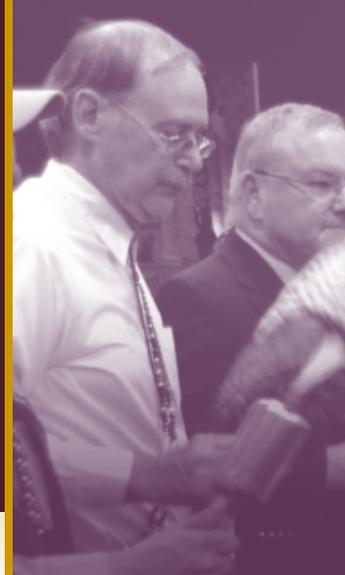
VA recognizes and respects the sovereignty of tribal governments and works to build a government-to-government relationship with Federally recognized tribes. OTGR is responsible for facilitating the implementation of VA's Tribal Consultation Policy, which requires tribal consultation to occur before VA takes action or makes decisions that may significantly affect tribal resources, rights, or lands.

Implementing Community Care for Veterans

VA sent a Dear Tribal Leader letter in 2015 related to the process of streamlining Veterans' access to non-VA care. The letter notified tribal leaders of and asked for comment on VA's proposal to include Indian Health Service (IHS) and tribal health programs as part of VA's core network of care providers, as VA defines and builds this network in coming years.

The Veterans Health Administration submitted its Plan to Consolidate Community Care Programs to Congress on October 30, 2015, as required by law. In the plan, they identified feedback from tribes who responded to the 2015 letter, including:

- Strong support for including IHS facilities and tribal health programs as key partners in VA's community network
- Desire to maintain and strengthen current agreements between VA, IHS, and tribal health programs
- Interest from IHS and tribal health programs in potentially serving non-Native Veterans



As 2015 drew to a close, the VA-IHS joint report required by Section 102(c) of the Choice Act¹ was provided to Congress.

Upcoming Consultation in 2016

As part of the tribal consultation agenda for 2016, VA will seek input from tribal leaders on **the top 3 to 5 priorities that tribes have for serving Veterans across Indian Country**. Once identified, these priorities may be used to assist with development of an Indian Country Veterans Affairs policy agenda, which will inform tribal governments, VA, members of Congress, and other Veteran-serving partners in coming years.

Update on Black Hills Reconfiguration

In 2014, VA conducted tribal consultation on the proposed reorganization of health facilities in the VA Black Hills Health Care System (VA Black Hills), serving parts of four north central states. VA's 2014 Tribal Consultation Report contains the comments VA received during this consultation.

No realignment of services in VA Black Hills has been approved by Secretary McDonald at this time, and VA continues to evaluate the proposals. There has been no change in services in VA Black Hills that affects services available to American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans in the area.

¹ Section 102(c) of the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014, Public Law 113–146.



Supporting Access to Health Care

Annual Native American Veterans Honor Dance at Oklahoma City VA Health Care System

One of VA's most important goals is to connect Veterans with health care services through raising awareness of the care available and working to remove barriers to access.

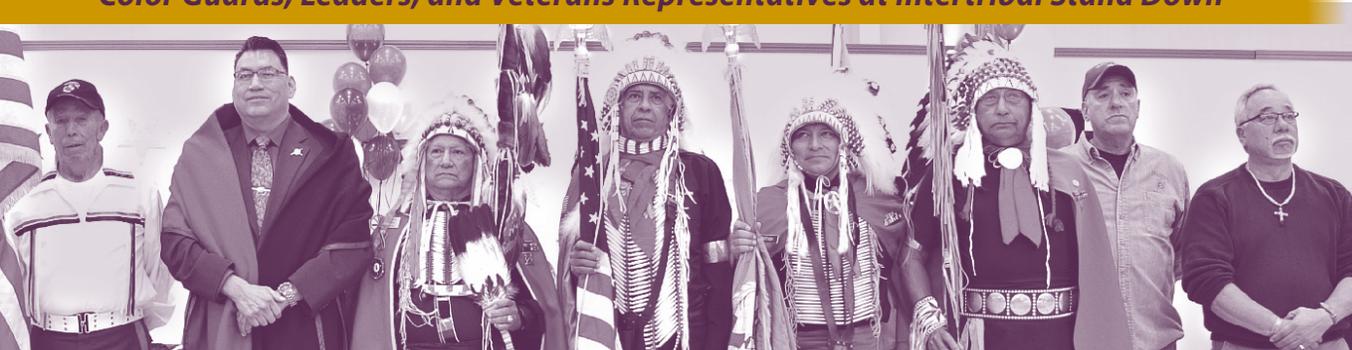
VA-IHS MOU

The memorandum of understanding (MOU) between VA and IHS was signed in 2010 with the goal of facilitating a wide range of collaborative activities between VA and IHS to increase access and improve health care services for American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans. Since then, the Veterans Health Administration's Office of Rural Health, OTGR, and the IHS Chief Medical Officer have led the implementation of the VA-IHS MOU.

VA-IHS MOU Accomplishments

In 2015, VA and IHS noted the following achievements in advancing health care access and quality for Veterans under the VA-IHS MOU.

- **1,200,000 prescriptions** have been mailed to Veterans at their homes, decreasing their need to travel to clinics (since 2010)
- **401 shared trainings** were conducted between VA and IHS (since 2013)
- **337 shared Continuing Medical Education credits** were offered (since 2013)
- **Cultural competency and post-traumatic stress disorder trainings** were produced and made available to VA and IHS staff



- **Electronic health information exchange capabilities** were tested between VA and IHS for care coordination
- **14 standard VA-IHS MOU performance metrics** were developed for implementation in fiscal years 2016 and 2017

Advancing the Goals of the VA-IHS MOU

The VA-IHS MOU has five main goals, and the Office of Rural Health collects information on progress toward meeting these goals. VA is divided into 19 areas, called Veterans Integrated Service Networks, and the Office of Rural Health gathers information each quarter from the area networks about their activities focused on American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans.

There were 415 events reported in fiscal year 2015. Each event focused on at least one MOU goal, and some events contributed to more than one goal, as shown in the table below.

| Activities Contributing to VA-IHS MOU Goals | Number of Events/Efforts |
|---|--------------------------|
| 1. Increase access to care for American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans | 325 |
| 2. Improve quality and coordination of care for American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans | 220 |
| 3. Encourage patient-centered collaboration and partnership between VA and IHS | 108 |
| 4. Ensure health promotion and disease prevention services are appropriately funded and available | 42 |
| 5. Consult with tribes at the regional and local levels | 138 |

In fiscal year 2015, Veterans Integrated Service Networks reported **415 unique events and focused efforts** across the country, impacting an estimated total of **34,000 American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans**.

VA-IHS MOU Work Groups

There are seven combined work groups that help implement the VA-IHS MOU's goals. The seven groups are:

- Care Coordination
- Health Information Technology
- New Technologies
- Payment and Reimbursement
- Sharing Care Process, Programs, and Services
- Cultural Competency and Awareness
- Training and Recruitment

Joint VA-IHS Listening Session

On September 24, 2015, VA and IHS held a joint listening session focused on American Indian and Alaska Native access to care during the National Indian Health Board Annual Consumer Conference in Washington, DC. VA executives from the Office of Rural Health, the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, OTGR, the Veterans Health Administration Chief Business Office, and representatives from the IHS Chief Medical Officer's office received direct feedback from tribal members about issues pertaining to VA benefits and access to health care.

VA-IHS MOU Outreach and Awareness

VA makes an ongoing effort to ensure that tribal communities know about the VA-IHS MOU and the programs and opportunities available under it. In April 2015, leaders from the Veterans Health Administration Chief Business Office, Office of Rural Health, OTGR, IHS, and the National Indian Health Board met to strategize about outreach to tribal communities about the VA-IHS MOU.

During that meeting, the leadership group agreed that VA will send a Dear Tribal Leader letter each year to all Federally recognized tribes to share information and

*Mr. Philip Coon, WWII Veteran and Bataan Death March Survivor,
at the 13th Annual Oklahoma City VA Health Care System
Native American Veterans Honor Dance*

opportunities about the VA-IHS MOU. This letter will also help VA to meet the requirement in Section 102(a) of the Veterans Choice Act to conduct outreach to medical facilities operated by tribes to promote the VA-IHS reimbursement program.

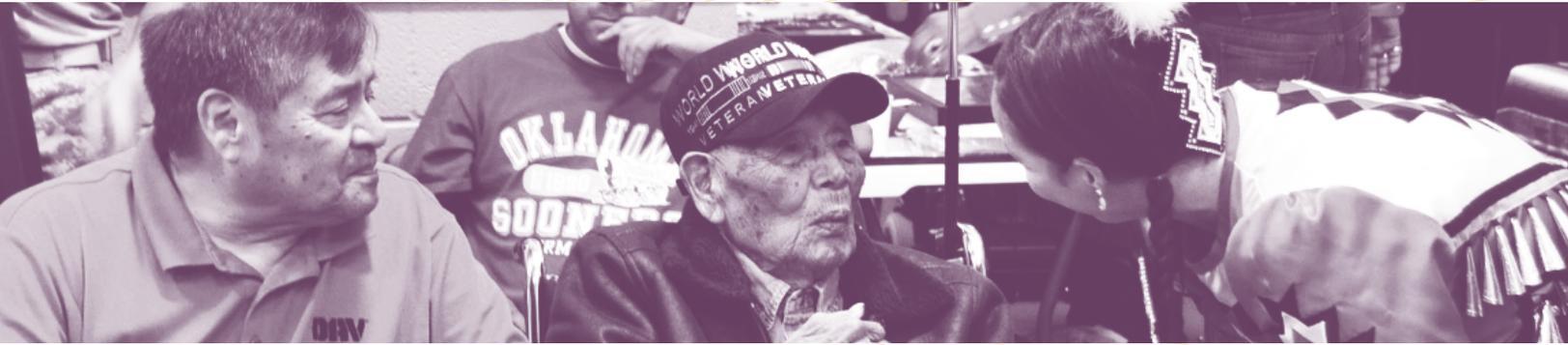
VA provides tremendous resources to ensure that all American Indian Veterans at our clinics gain awareness of the numerous benefits available to them aside from health care. VA routinely sends individuals and teams who help identify Veterans who, for one reason or another, never had an opportunity to learn about the benefits available to them. Then, Veterans receive assistance in completing the necessary paperwork, and many determine they are eligible for numerous benefits that enhance their lives in many ways.

– Charles Magruder, M.D., M.P.H., Chief Medical Officer, California Area Indian Health Service

IHS and Tribal Health Program Reimbursement Agreements

The VA-IHS MOU discusses the development of payment and reimbursement policies and mechanisms. Reimbursement agreements enable VA to reimburse IHS and tribally operated health programs for direct care services provided to eligible American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans.

A reimbursement agreement was signed between VHA and IHS in 2012, and this agreement allows VA to reimburse for direct care services provided to eligible American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans at all IHS sites across the country. Implementation plans were developed between local VHA and IHS sites.

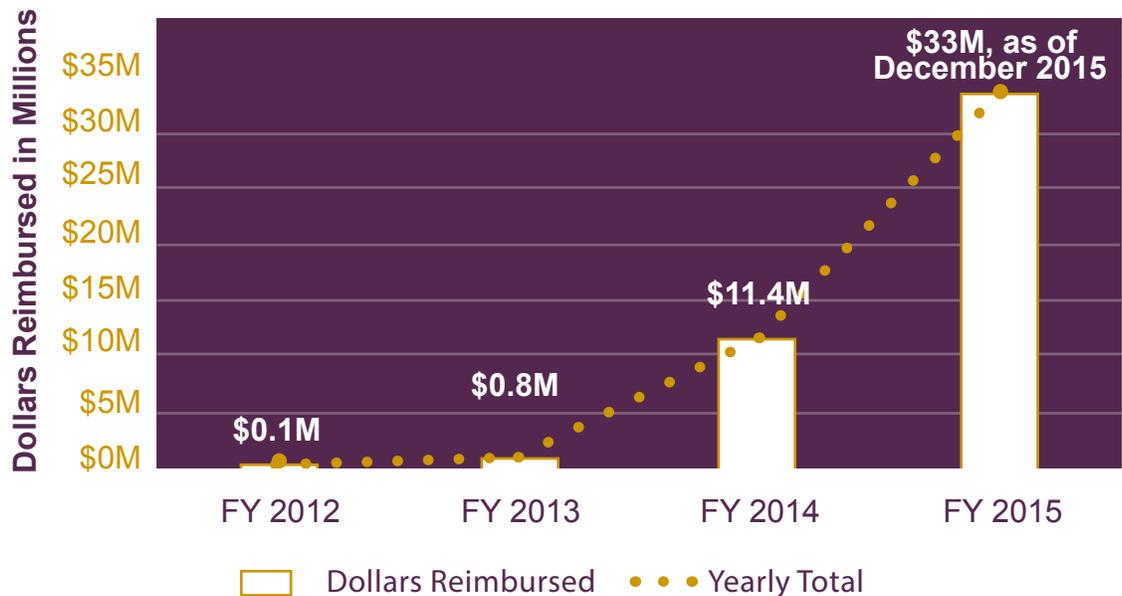


Tribal health programs enter into local reimbursement agreements with nearby VA medical centers. As of 2015, there are a total of 89 signed local reimbursement agreements with tribal health programs. More are in process.

| Reimbursement Agreement – Accomplishments | Total |
|--|-------|
| Local reimbursement agreements with tribal health programs | 89 |
| IHS implementation plans in effect | 83 |
| IHS sites covered | 108 |

Reimbursements through the reimbursement agreements have grown steadily since they first began to be implemented in 2012. The graph below includes reimbursements under the IHS and tribal health program reimbursement agreements.

VA Reimbursements to IHS and Tribal Health Programs





Outreach and Technical Assistance for Reimbursement Agreements

To promote reimbursement agreements and support IHS implementation plans, OTGR and Veterans Health Administration staff conducts site visits, calls, and other outreach activities on an ongoing basis. For example, OTGR representatives facilitate national technical assistance calls to answer questions and provide support to IHS sites that are working with implementation plans.

The Veterans Health Administration Chief Business Office offers orientations to tribal health programs interested in establishing local reimbursement agreements, and other technical assistance resources are offered online.

Other Health Initiatives

Beyond VA-IHS MOU activities, VA is involved in ongoing efforts to address challenges to health care access for American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans.

Office of Rural Health Investments in Health Access

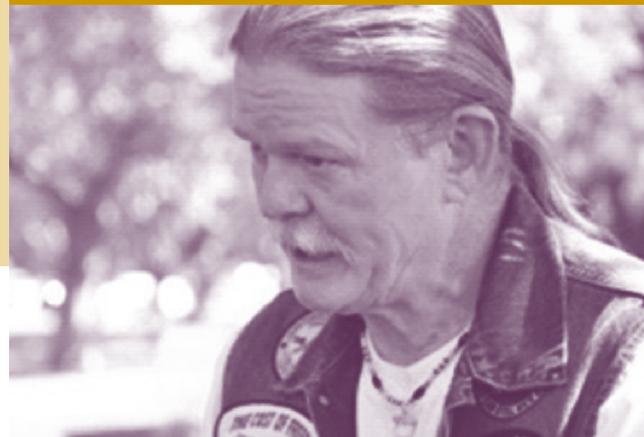
In fiscal year 2015, the Office of Rural Health invested **\$3.9 million in 13 initiatives** focused on American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans, addressing topics such as mental health, home-based primary care, primary care, telehealth, and eligibility and benefits services. The initiatives reached **5,961 Veterans**. Of those reached, **43 percent were American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans**.

Native Domain

Many Native Veterans live in rural areas and face special challenges to accessing health care. The Office of Rural Health provides the Native Domain online resource to share information, research, and toolkits focused on the American Indian and Alaska Native population. These resources are available on the Native Domain website at ruralhealth.va.gov/native.

In 2015, the Veterans Rural Health Resource Center in Salt Lake City, UT, which manages the Native Domain, conducted research, consultation, and demonstration projects on:

- Expanding telemental health services for rural American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans
- Providing online resources for Veterans Health Administration personnel to learn more about serving rural American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans
- Collaborating with tribal colleges and universities to improve health access for American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans in rural areas



Finding Care with VA

Jack Flowers, an Army Veteran and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, was “ecstatic about VA’s care” for Hepatitis C after a VA staff member helped connect him with treatment in 2015. Mr. Flowers believes he contracted Hepatitis C from immunizations he received during his service as a Vietnam-era Veteran. He is now viral free after receiving a new treatment.

Veterans are twice as likely as the general public to contract this disease. Jack urges other Veterans who have Hepatitis C to entrust their care to VA and to ask about newer treatment options.



Cultural Competency in Delivering Health Care

All of VA's programs strive to engage with Indian Country effectively, respectfully, and with cultural sensitivity. Below are some of the cultural competency activities and trainings conducted in 2015.

Office of Diversity and Inclusion

The Office of Diversity and Inclusion held cultural competency trainings in areas of the country for VA staff who are likely to work with American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans. Training locations and American Indian and Alaska Native populations addressed included:

- Fort Harrison, MT – Blackfeet Nation
- Sheridan, WY – Crow Nation
- Fort Meade and Hot Springs, SD – Oglala Sioux Tribe
- Salt Lake City, UT – Shoshone-Bannock and Ute Indian Tribes
- Fargo, ND – Chippewa Tribes
- Reno, NV – Paiute and Western Shoshone Tribes
- Omaha and Lincoln, NE – Santee Sioux Nation and Omaha Tribe
- Sioux Falls, SD – Oglala Sioux Tribe

At each location, hundreds of VA service providers received training.



Office of Health Equity

The Office of Health Equity was created to promote equity in health care and health outcomes for all Veterans by addressing the root causes of health disparities, including race and ethnicity, geographic location, and socioeconomic status, among other factors. This office specifically champions equitable health and health care and the reduction of health disparities for American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans.

The Office of Health Equity's 2015 Health Equity Environmental Scan identified 20 health equity programs within VA that are Native-specific, including VA collaborations with tribal health clinics, targeted outreach to American Indian and Alaska Native populations, and efforts to improve data collection techniques and decrease racial misidentification for Native Veterans who receive VA care. They also shared information about health disparities in Native Veteran populations at the White House Council on Women and Girls and the National Academies of Science Roundtable on the Promotion of Health Equity and the Elimination of Health Disparities.



Camp Chaparral

In the Pacific Northwest, VA has offered a special cultural immersion training to its employees for 20 years. VA clinical and frontline staff travel to **Camp Chaparral**, on the sacred grounds of the Yakama Nation in Washington state, for a week-long training where numerous other tribes are represented. Participants learn about cultural differences and traditional Native approaches to healing. VA staff can join in ceremonial healing activities, such as sweat lodges. Although circumstances prevented Camp Chaparral from taking place in 2015, plans are underway to bring it back in 2016.

Cultural immersion trainings for VA employees have begun in other areas as well, such as the **Gathering of Healers** events in South Dakota, Arizona, and New Mexico. These special trainings are an important way VA responds constructively to incidents of discrimination that are sometimes reported by Native Veterans in the VA system. They also help VA employees conduct outreach more effectively.

Clockwise from left:

1. Leaders singing Horse Song at Camp Chaparral 2. Vietnam combat Veteran raising the flag 3. Grand Entry Dance to honor Veterans 4. Marching in Camp Chaparral's opening ceremony 5. Portland VA Representatives receiving Pendleton blankets 6. Honoring a returning soldier in Welcome Home ceremony



It's always helpful to see that VA participates in local events, like the California Rural Indian Health Board's recent tribal consultation. Folks who have questions about VA can have direct contact with staff and consult with them regarding programs or services that are available.

- Libby Watanabe, former Chief Operations Officer for the Toiyabe Indian Health Project***
-



Prairie Band of Potawatomi Chair Signing MOU for Tribal Home Loan Benefit



Promoting Benefits and Services

Apsaalooke Veterans Park at Crow Agency, MT

Beyond health care, there are many benefits and programs through VA that are designed to support Veterans' overall wellbeing, such as educational benefits and housing programs. One of VA's goals is to ensure that tribal governments and Veterans in Indian Country are aware of and can access these services.

In 2015, VA efforts in Indian Country to connect Veterans with services and benefits included supporting housing benefits and homelessness services, providing memorial services, and promoting Veterans courts.

Native American Direct Loan Program

The Native American Direct Loan program assists eligible American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans in financing, buying, or improving homes by providing a low interest rate, no down payment, no private mortgage insurance, and limited closing costs. To implement this program on tribal lands, a tribe's government must sign an MOU with VA.

In 2015, the following tribes signed new MOUs for the Native American Direct Loan program:

- Makah Tribe
- Mescalero Apache Tribe
- Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians
- Northern Cheyenne Tribe
- Northern Ute Tribe
- Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation
- Pueblo of Taos
- Suquamish Tribe



| Native American Direct Loans – Accomplishments | Number |
|---|--------------------|
| Total loans completed in 2015 | 18 |
| Total loan amount extended in 2015 | \$3,816,881 |
| New MOUs signed in 2015 | 8 |
| Total MOUs signed | 93 |

Outreach

VA worked to raise awareness of the Native American Direct Loan program, its benefits for Veterans, and the need for an MOU to implement the program on tribal lands by sharing information in the following ways:

- *Vantage Point*, VA's blog, included posts about the Mescalero Apache, Prairie Band Potawatomi, and Pueblo of Taos MOUs
- *Indian Country Today* featured an article on the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation MOU and described the Native American Direct Loan program
- OTGR shared information about the Native American Direct Loan program on its website and in its national newsletter
- Contacted over 550 tribes to discuss the Native American Direct Loan program and the MOU process

Helping Homeless Veterans

In 2015, VA continued its work to address Veteran homelessness.

HUD-VASH

Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) is a joint effort of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and VA.

Under this program, HUD offers housing vouchers to homeless Veterans, and VA provides outreach, case management, and supportive services.

As 2015 came to a close, HUD announced the launch of Tribal HUD-VASH, with initial invited sites receiving support from HUD and the Veterans Health Administration to implement HUD-VASH in Indian Country. More information about Tribal HUD-VASH is available here: http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/press/press_releases_media_advisories/2016/HUDNo_16-001

Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program

The Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program, conducted by the Secretary of Labor, offers services to help homeless Veterans join the labor force and address the complex issues they face. The program awards grants to organizations that provide services to homeless Veterans. In 2015, VA supported the implementation of the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program grants on tribal lands.

- VA participated in a collaborative training event in Oklahoma City where:
 - ◇ Tribes received technical assistance on the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program grant process from the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans and a tribal representative who had previously applied for the grant
 - ◇ The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans and the Department of Labor, in turn, received cultural training from tribal representatives to help them work more effectively with tribes on this grant

Stand Downs

Stand downs are events where homeless Veterans may find supplies and services, including food, shelter, clothing, health screenings, and referrals to other assistance. Stand downs are often coordinated collaboratively between VA medical



centers and other organizations, including tribal governments and tribal Veterans organizations, and the events can help tribal governments and local VA staff build working relationships together. For example, in 2015, the Oklahoma City VA Health Care System, Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes, Delaware Nation, and the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes collaborated to host a stand down in Clinton, OK, with additional support from the Comanche Indian Veterans Association, the Kiowa Black Leggings, the Buddy Bond Native American Honor Guard, and the local American Legion. At this stand down, 209 Veterans were served, representing 24 different tribal affiliations. Similar stand down events were held serving numerous tribes in Alaska, Arizona, Minnesota, North Dakota, Oregon, and South Dakota.

Memorial Services

The National Cemetery Administration, one of VA's three administrations, maintains Veterans cemeteries throughout the country. The Veterans Cemetery Grants Program complements the National Cemetery Administration by awarding grants to states and tribal governments where Veterans are unserved. Tribal grants are available for establishing Veterans cemeteries on tribal trust lands.² These grants give tribal Veterans burial options on their own lands, where they and their ancestors have lived. At the end of fiscal year 2015, there were five fully operational tribal cemeteries throughout the country, with four more under construction.

- The Seminole Nation of Oklahoma cemetery was dedicated in November 2014
- The Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma has a tribal resolution pending to apply for the tribal cemetery grant
- The Ponca Nation broke ground on a cemetery in 2015
- The Band of Western Mono Indians has a cemetery currently under construction
- The Crow Agency has a cemetery currently under construction
- The San Carlos Apache Tribe will soon dedicate their Veterans cemetery

² In accordance with 38 Code of Federal Regulations Part 39.



Tribal Veterans Cemeteries Funded by the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program, as of 2015

- 1.** Apsaalooke Veterans Park (Crow Nation)
- 2.** Big Sandy Rancheria Band of Western Mono Indians Veterans Cemetery
- 3.** Oglala Sioux Tribe Veterans Cemetery
- 4.** Pascua Yaqui Tribe Veterans Cemetery
- 5.** Ponca Tribe Veterans Cemetery
- 6.** Rosebud Sioux Tribe Veterans Cemetery
- 7.** San Carlos Apache Tribe Veterans Cemetery
- 8.** Seminole Nation Veterans Cemetery
- 9.** Yurok Tribe Veterans Cemetery



Spirit of '45

In August 2015, a wreath-laying ceremony honored Veterans of WWII at the Seminole Nation Veterans Cemetery. The cemetery was funded, in part, through a Tribal Cemetery Grant from the National Cemetery Administration and dedicated in 2014.

Clockwise from left:

1. Retiring the colors at a Veterans Training Summit **2.** OTGR Director Stephanie Birdwell meets with Navajo Nation President and Vice President **3.** POW-MIA ceremony at Grand Ronde Gathering of Warriors **4.** Three members of Native American Women Warriors, a national organization for Native women Veterans **5.** WWII Veteran stands for recognition at a Veterans Benefits Summit **6.** Washington State Veterans Committee Advisor Frank Cordero and Native Veteran Wink Soderburg

Veterans Courts

Veterans courts, sometimes called Veterans Treatment Courts, are designed to serve Veterans and address their unique circumstances. These courts emphasize treatment and rehabilitation as an alternative to placing Veterans into the criminal justice system. The Veterans Health Administration and OTGR worked to raise awareness throughout Indian Country of the purpose of Veterans courts and how tribal courts could implement them.

Sisseton Wahpeton Tribe has implemented a Veterans court, and Hopi Tribal Court will implement theirs in early 2016.

OTGR staff gave presentations on the benefits of Veterans courts at conferences and events across the country. Efforts to increase outreach to tribes and awareness about Veterans courts will continue in 2016.





Navajo Nation Code Talker Dan Akee



Conclusion

Members of Alaska Territorial Guard in Kwigillingok, AK

VA celebrates the accomplishments of 2015 in improving services to American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans and strengthening collaborations with tribal governments. As of December 31, 2015, VA reimbursements to IHS and tribal health programs passed the \$33 million mark, HUD-VASH was nearing its launch on tribal lands, more Native American Direct Loan MOUs have been signed, and VA has completed another year of outreach and events, including stand downs, webinars, Veterans training summits, and collaborative activities with tribal, local, and Federal agencies.

In 2015, VA also laid the groundwork for a major transformation in its organization and service delivery, including the MyVA reorganization and the development of the Plan to Consolidate Community Care Programs. VA looks forward to collaborating with IHS, tribal governments, and tribal and urban Indian health facilities as it moves into this new stage. Tribal consultation will allow tribal governments to stay in close communication with VA, receiving information and offering input as these changes take place.

OTGR wishes to thank tribal governments for their continued support, collaboration, and input as VA continues its ongoing commitment to engage Indian Country and to honor and serve American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans.

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Clockwise from left:

1. Seminole Nation Veterans at Veterans Day event **2.** Wreath commemorating WWII Veterans at Seminole Nation Veterans Cemetery **3.** VA Office of Tribal Government Relations booth at 2015 National Congress of American Indians event **4.** OTGR Regional Specialist Mary Culley with VIPs and supporting partners at Intertribal Homeless Veterans Stand Down in Clinton, OK **5.** Welcome banner at Veterans Summit in Warm Springs, OR **6.** Seminole Nation Honor Guard



VA



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