
VA Office of Tribal Government Relations Newsletter ~ Fall 2019

Welcome to another special combined edition of the VA Office of Tribal Government Relations (OTGR) newsletter. This has been a busy season! November is Native American Heritage Month and of course while we know Native communities and people are blessed to experience Native heritage and culture each and every day, we hope that our readers' workplaces and local communities were able to take time to celebrate, share and highlight some of the rich culture, food, traditions and contributions of Native Americans.

We also hope our readers had an enjoyable Veterans Day this year and that you were able to honor the Veterans in your lives. Our very own OTGR colleague, Clay Ward, spent the day volunteering at Veterans Day events held in the DC area, including ceremonies held over at Arlington National Cemetery.

Last week, the White House hosted a conference here in D.C. focused on contemporary Native Veterans. It was great to see many of the tribal leaders, Veteran advocates and Veterans we work with on a regular basis all in one location. Three Cabinet Secretaries (VA Secretary Wilkie; Department of Interior Secretary Bernhardt; and Department of Labor Secretary Scalia) addressed the gathering, along with speakers from a series of panels which included the White House Domestic Policy Council, a panel focused on business and economic development and a panel focused on VA benefits. A highlight of the event was a visit from Vice President Pence, who not only reflected on the legacy of service to the United States Armed Forces by Native peoples, but also extended his sincere gratitude and appreciation for those who continue to serve to this day.

Leadership from the Three Affiliated Tribes honored Vice President Pence following his remarks. Special thanks to Tyler Fish (Cherokee Nation), Senior Policy Advisor and Tribal Liaison to the White House, for proposing the concept and for his leadership in organizing the event. As a follow up to the White House event, VA leadership is working on a national conference focused on Native Veterans to be held in 2020. Stay tuned for a save the date notice and more updates in the days ahead.

Looking back further on the fall calendar, several events occurred that will have continued impact in the days ahead. They are as follows:

VA/IHS MOU Tribal Consultation

The most recent version of the MOU was signed in 2010. The goals of the current MOU are:

- Increase access and quality of care for AI/AN Veterans
- Improve health-promotion and disease-prevention
- Encourage patient-centered collaboration and communication
- Consult with tribes at the regional and local levels
- Ensure appropriate resources for services for AI/AN Veterans

In March 2019, GAO issued the report: "Actions Needed to Strengthen Oversight and Coordination of Health Care for American Indians and Alaska Native Veterans" (GAO-19-291). The GAO recommended "that as VA and IHS revise the MOU and related performance measures, the VA Secretary and IHS Director should ensure these measures are consistent with key attributes of successful performance measures, including having

measurable targets.” Following this GAO report, VA and IHS announced the beginning of the tribal consultation process. In September, the two agencies initiated the MOU tribal consultation held in Temecula, California during the annual National Indian Health Board consumer conference. The agencies will continue to gather input through informational listening sessions, tribal consultation, comment periods, and webinars in the months ahead. Once tribal consultation and information gathering is complete, VA and IHS will review input and make decisions on execution of the MOU and related performance measures, including creating targets (which do not exist for the current performance measures).

The new MOU will be more flexible than the 2010 version and broad enough to adapt to current issues such as electronic health record modernization and increased collaboration between federal agencies.

Smithsonian, National Native American Veterans Memorial

VA Secretary Wilkie joined Chickasaw Nation Lieutenant Governor Jefferson Keel, Congresswoman Debra Haaland, National Museum of the American Indian Director Kevin Gover, Memorial Designer Harvey Pratt and other dignitaries to break ground on the National Native American Veterans Memorial. The Memorial will honor the distinguished and exceptional service of Native Americans in every branch of the U.S. Armed Forces. A dedication ceremony will be held in November of 2020. It is anticipated that tribal leaders, Veterans and family members from across the country and around the globe will converge on the National Mall next year for the dedication. Visitors can look forward to participating in a series of forums and interactive exhibits which tell the story of the legacy of Native American military service, past and present. The Memorial will be an enduring tribute and source of healing, education and information for the thousands of visitors to our nation’s capital in the years ahead.

Congressional Committee/Subcommittee Hearings

On October 30, 2019, the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Subcommittee on Health held a hearing entitled “Native Veterans’ Access to Healthcare.” This oversight hearing examined the unique barriers American Indian and Alaska Native veterans continue to face when seeking access to quality, culturally competent care from VA and tribal health systems. VA and IHS witnesses included VHA Undersecretary for Community Care, Dr. Kameron Matthews and VHA Director, Office of Rural Health, Dr. Tom Klobucar along with Ben Smith, IHS Director, Office of Intergovernmental Affairs. Tribal and Native organization witnesses included Native Veteran health care advocate Andy Joseph (Colville), Mohegan Chief Dr. Marilyn Malerba, Chief William Smith, Vice Chairperson National Indian Health Board, National Council of Urban Indian Health Vice President and Veteran Sonja Tetnowksi (Makah), National Congress of the American Indians CEO Kevin Allis. Details of the hearing can be found here:

<https://docs.house.gov/Committee/Calendar/ByEvent.aspx?EventID=110128>

On November 20, 2019, the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs (SCIA) held an oversight hearing on “Recognizing the Sacrifice: Honoring a Nation’s Promise to Native Veterans” and Legislative Hearing to receive testimony on both S. 1001 Tribal Veterans Healthcare Enhancement Act and S. 1065 Health Care Access for Urban Native Veterans 2019. This hearing was the first time a VA Secretary testified before the SCIA. The Secretary affirmed his commitment to and respect for the government to government relationship

between the United States and Indian Tribes and further affirmed his commitment to working collaboratively with tribes, the Indian Health Service and Urban Indian Health Programs to reach and serve Native Veterans where ever they are located, whether it is in remote locations or in urban areas. Details of the hearing can be found here: <https://www.indian.senate.gov/hearing/oversight-hearing-recognizing-sacrifice-honoring-nation-s-promise-native-veterans>.

Our OTGR team has been working hard these past several months. In the Southern Plains, our OTGR specialist Mary Culley was busy supporting presumptive claims events held during the Cheyenne and Arapaho Veterans Stand Down in Clinton, OK and a Kiowa, Apache and Comanche Veterans outreach event held in Lawton, OK. She also made regional presentations at the VA Center for Minority Veterans Conference held in Dallas, TX and the Oklahoma Tribal Women Veterans Summit held in Oklahoma City, OK. In early November, she traveled to New Orleans, LA to serve on a VHA Diversity and Inclusion Integrated Project Team focused on increasing the workforce diversity at all levels within VHA. Mary crisscrossed the state of Oklahoma and her region to assist with inter-agency training sessions, symposiums and task forces. She also participated in the Clinton (OK) IHS Veterans Recognition Ceremony and the OKC VA Veterans Gourd (Honor) Dance. Right now, she is putting the finishing touches on her regional schedule for the coming year.

Over in the Western Region, OTGR specialist Terry Bentley had a busy fall lining up the VA outreach booth during the NIHB conference and supporting the VA/IHS MOU Tribal Consultation held in Temecula, CA. She worked collaboratively with the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe to plan and hold the Cow Creek Tribal Veterans Fall Gathering held at Seven Feathers Hotel and Resort in Canyonville, OR. A combined total of 50 Veterans, family members and VA personnel were on hand to provide information about VA services and benefits to attendees. The event was well received and OTGR looks forward to future collaborations with the tribe. On the horizon, Terry is planning, on January 27-30, 2020, to participate in the Affiliated Tribes of the Northwest Indians (ATNI) winter gathering in Portland, OR. Terry will brief the Veterans Committee and tribal officials in attendance. She is also working on her schedule for the coming year and will have many more updates in the weeks ahead.

In the Southwest, Homana Pawiki lined up a number of VA presenters for regional training sessions, conferences and outreach events. She also briefed the VA National Cemetery Administration, Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials during their meeting held in Phoenix on October 22-23. She accompanied the Committee on a site visit to the San Carlos Apache Tribal Veterans Cemetery, which is one of 13 Veterans cemeteries funded in part by a grant from VA/NCA. Homana was also on hand to attend and lend support to the 19th Annual Veterans Health and Wellness Symposium held November 8th at the Isleta Resort and Casino in Albuquerque. The planning committee for this event always does an outstanding job organizing speakers, leaders and subject matter experts from VA, IHS, other federal and state agencies as well as Tribal leaders, Veteran service providers, Veterans and their family members. This event is held annually and one we highly recommend our readers note and add to your calendars if you can make it next year.

Up north, Peter Vicaire helped coordinate Veteran claims events with the Meskwaki in Iowa; Confederated Salish & Kootenai, Fort Peck, Rocky Boy, and Fort Belknap in Montana; Menominee in Wisconsin; Wind River in Wyoming; and Pokagon Band in Michigan. He also assembled and attended a VA panel to present information on elderly Veterans at a National Title VI Older Indians Conference in

Minneapolis. In addition to these events, he also organized a face-to-face meeting with VA Secretary Wilkie and Tribal Veteran Service Officers (TVSOs) in South Dakota as well as helped coordinate two full days of presentations to the Veterans Committee of the United South and Eastern Tribes (USET) which took place at Mississippi Choctaw in November. He also wrote a short article regarding the illegal state taxation of Native American Veterans, which will be published in the Jan/Feb 2020 issue of the Federal Lawyer magazine. Regarding this matter, he'd like to remind Native Veterans in Arizona that December 31 is the deadline to apply for the Arizona Native American Veterans Settlement Fund, which was established in July, 2016.

We will be posting specific updates and a schedule of upcoming events to our website: www.va.gov/tribalgovernment during the month of December and in our next newsletter.

We wish you and yours a safe, peaceful holiday season. We are thankful for the service of all Veterans and their families and are looking forward to seeing (and working with) many of our readers in the coming year. Warm Regards,

Stephanie





Thank you to the Native American and Alaska Native Veterans, active duty service members, and State, local and tribal veterans champions that joined us for the White House Conference on Supporting Contemporary Native American Veterans. It was an honor to host you at the White House and to acknowledge the long legacy of Native American military service ([Presidential Proclamation on National Native American Heritage Month, 2019](#)). We hope that you enjoyed the briefings and discussion with Vice President Mike Pence, Senior Administration Officials – including Secretary Robert Wilkie (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs), Secretary David Bernhardt (U.S. Department of the Interior), Secretary Eugene Scalia (U.S. Department of Labor), Administrator Chris Pilskerton (U.S. Small Business Administration), and Assistant to the President Joe Grogan – and our panel participants from across the federal family on issues and priorities pertinent to Native American veterans. We look forward to continuing to engage with you and your tribal leadership on issues like veterans benefits, housing, job training, entrepreneurship, and health/mental health and welcome your feedback.

Please also find two tweets on the event from the White House ([here](#)) and Vice President Mike Pence ([here](#)). We hope that you will share these as well as your own.



We want to emphasize that this is not a “check-the-box” exercise but rather a continued commitment by the President and the Administration to build and foster relationships with Tribal Leaders and communities from across the country around important issues.

In March 2019, for example, President Trump announced the formation of a Presidential Task Force to investigate abuses in the Indian Health Service ([White House Announced Presidential Task Force on Protecting Native American Children in the Indian Health Service System](#)). A report from the Task Force is forthcoming. On May 3, the President issued a [Proclamation](#) recognizing Missing and Murdered American Indians and Alaska Natives Awareness Day to raise awareness around the injustices committed against our



most vulnerable populations. The White House and Administration also remain committed to promoting impactful policies and outcomes around infrastructure development (broadband, energy development, etc.), workforce/economic development initiatives (opportunity zones), and healthy communities (combatting the opioid/drug crisis and promoting telehealth, for example).

Native Veterans head to Capitol Hill after event at White House

Here's an [article written by Acee Agoyo](#) which ran in Indianz.com on November 20



American Indians and Alaska Natives serve in the U.S. military at the highest rates of any racial or ethnic group but their needs often go ignored or are overshadowed by other developments.

But with National Native American Heritage Month in full swing, the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs is hoping to put focus back on the first Americans. At a hearing on Wednesday afternoon, the panel will hear from a prominent Trump administration official -- Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert Wilkie. "You serve in the military of the United States at a higher rate than any group of Americans," Wilkie told the Alaska Federation of Natives at the group's annual conference in Anchorage last year. "Roughly 140,000 of America's service members trace their ancestry back to America's Native people."



Vice President Mike Pence 
@VP



Honored to meet with Native American Veterans today! Native Americans have bravely served our country in uniform and we are forever grateful for the contribution they have made to the life of our nation. Thank you for your service!





The hearing comes a day after Wilkie and other military and Trump administration officials, including Vice President Mike Pence, took part in a special conference in the nation's capital. They hosted dozens of Native veterans -- among them two tribal leaders who are testifying at the hearing -- in a packed room at the White House on Tuesday.



"Native Americans have bravely served our country in uniform and we are forever grateful for the contribution they have made to the life of our nation," Pence said in a post on social media. "Thank you for your service!"



Mark Fox, the chairman of Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation, and Jestin Dupree, a council member from the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes, were among the veterans in attendance at the event. In addition to Pence and Wilkie, participants heard from several members of Trump's Cabinet about some of the issues affecting Native veterans. "The opioid issue is lingering out there and it's taking the lives of far too many people," Dupree said in a post on social media after the White House Conference on Supporting Contemporary Native American Veterans. He plans on sharing additional challenges facing Native veterans at the hearing on Wednesday.



Brig. Gen. Wright
@OKMilitia



Honored to attend the @WhiteHouse conference on Native American Veterans @Mike_Pence @SecWilkie @SecBernhardt



17 5:43 PM - Nov 19, 2019 - Washington, DC



But while Wilkie is making his first appearance before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, some advocates wished he had showed up to Capitol Hill just a bit earlier. Witnesses at a hearing of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs late last month were bothered by the Trump administration's failure to send anyone to the proceeding.



"As a veteran, I'm disappointed that Secretary Robert Wilkie and Rear Admiral Weahkee will not be here today," Andy Joseph, a citizen of the Colville Tribes said of the Veterans Affairs leader and of Michael Weahkee, whom President Donald Trump has tapped to serve as his first director of the Indian Health Service, which works with the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide services to Native veterans.

"Both Secretary Wilkie and the Rear Admiral have spoken about their desire to better serve the health needs of Native veterans," said Joseph, who testified on behalf of the National Indian Health Board on October 30. "We are counting on them and this administration."

Proudly Representing Oklahoma at White House Conference on Supporting Contemporary Native American Veterans

Here's an [article from OTGR's own Mary Culley](#), which ran in VA Insider on November 25.

Last week, VA senior leaders and tribal relations staff, Native American Veterans, and state officials from Oklahoma joined their counterparts, senior administration officials, and policymakers at the White House Conference on Supporting Contemporary Native American Veterans.



"It was an honor to be at the White House's 2019 ceremony to honor American Indian and Alaska Native veterans," said Tribal Relations Specialist Mary Culley, who attended along with Oklahoma City VA Health Care System Director Kristopher Wade Vlosich and Eastern Oklahoma VA Health Care System Director Mark Morgan.



“This year, the focus was specifically on the continuing legacy of military service in Indian Country.”

American Indians and Alaska Natives have served in every foreign conflict since the founding of the United States and serving in some of the most critical roles at pivotal moments in our nation’s history. There are approximately 14,625 Native American Veterans residing in Oklahoma.



After an optional White House East Wing Tour, attendees participated in a discussion on the issues facing contemporary Native American veterans – including housing, job training, entrepreneurialism, and pathways to prosperity post-service. According to the Department of Defense, American Indians and Alaska Natives have the highest representations in the Armed Forces. VA consults with American Indian and Alaska Native tribal governments to develop partnerships that enhance access to services and benefits for Veterans and their families.

VA [Office of Tribal Government Relations](#) (OTGR) works to strengthen and build closer relations between the VA, tribal governments, and other key federal, state, private and non-profit partners in an effort to effectively and respectfully serve Veterans across Indian Country. OTGR facilitates VA’s Tribal Consultation Policy, increased access to health care, and promotes economic sustainability (highlighting opportunities for Veterans to access fiscal, educational, housing, and other special programs and benefits through the VA).



Secretary Wilkie Tells Congress VA is Committed to helping underserved Native Veterans

Here's an [article written by Abbie Bennett](#) which ran on Connecting Vets on November 21.



Native Americans and Native Alaskans are more likely to serve in the U.S. military than any other group and have served since the birth of the nation. Yet those veterans remain among the poorest and least insured veterans with the least access to Department of Veterans Affairs services.

On Wednesday, [November 20] VA Secretary Robert Wilkie told Congress he was "committed" to serving those veterans. It was the first time a VA secretary appeared before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, Wilkie said. 'No one steps up to serve' more than Native Americans, yet they are poorest, least insured vets.

This followed a hearing last month by the House Veterans Affairs Committee focused on Native veterans -- the first hearing in Congress on the subject in decades. There are 31,000 Native Americans and Alaska Natives on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces, Wilkie said, and there are another 140,000 Native veterans.

"They have the highest rate of award of the Medal of Honor and to this day serve in all ranks and are a testament to a very glorious history," he said. Some of those veterans live in far-flung, rural or remote areas, Wilkie said, and VA needs help reaching them. But more than 53 percent of them live in "urban centers," he said, and VA needs to build stronger relationships with them, too.

"I made a commitment when I was asked to come to VA that I would reach out to rural and Native America -- the two places in our country that have the highest per-capita rate of service," he said.

VA is working on expanding services, including:

- Telehealth capabilities, with a partnership with Walmart (which has locations in more remote areas than VA) to reach more veterans,
- Mail-order prescription program;
- More mobile clinics;
- More tribal health programs (114 now, with plans to add an additional 40);
- A new agreement with Native tribes for veteran health care.

"There is always more that could be done," he said. "It is our mission to ensure ... that all Native Americans know this VA belongs to them as well." Wilkie also advocated for legislation including the proposed IMPROVE Veterans Wellbeing Act, which would provide grants to community organizations to help combat veteran suicide as well as a bill in the



Senate that would create a VA advisory committee on tribal and Indian affairs. "It is long past time we had a VA tribal council," he said.

Sen. Martha McSally, R-Ariz., said she was frustrated that Native veterans continue to struggle for the benefits they earned through their service. She said expanding services such as telehealth may not help, since Internet connections are not available to all Native veterans living in more rural or remote areas.



Veterans Health Administration head Dr. Richard Stone said VA has a pilot program of mobile clinics to bring health care directly to those veterans. "It must expand dramatically," he said.

Native veterans also face higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide than fellow veterans. The majority of veterans who die by suicide are Vietnam veterans, Wilkie said. Wilkie said addressing veteran suicide is VA's No. 1 clinical priority.

When Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, asked if VA would commit to collecting and publishing specific annual Native veteran suicide data, Stone said: "We certainly pledge to you to pull that data out ... I think you identified a real weakness in how we approach this."

"Until we know the numbers we're not able to define the solutions," Murkowski said, adding that currently Native veterans are classified under an "other" category. "I will work on that categorization," Wilkie said.

VA will continue to work to expand services to Native veterans, Wilkie said, adding that he wants Congress' help in bringing them to the table. "I want all native veterans and their communities to know we are listening as we work on this," he said.

Veterans secretary promises better healthcare for Native and rural veterans



Here's [an article written by Vincent Schilling](#) from Indian Country Today on October 7.



United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert Leon Wilkie Jr. met with Native American veterans, tribal leaders and members of The Retired Enlisted Association in South Dakota on Wednesday [October 2] to discuss efforts to help Native American military veterans, specifically in the field of healthcare.

Sec. Wilkie told Indian Country Today in an interview that he wished to "shorten the distance between people" in need of veterans services.

"In speaking with the tribal representatives today, I talked about increasing Veteran Administration's reach into tribal communities with things like telehealth, visits from VA representatives and closer cooperation between the VA and Indian Health (Services)."



Secretary Wilkie and SD Tribal Veteran Service Officers

Wilkie explained that Veterans Affairs — an organization responsible for nearly three-quarters of a billion dollars worth of services offered by Indian Health Services — would be effectively “opening the aperture” on giving support to tribal governments and urban area localities.

He also explained that the methodologies for outreach needed to be updated in conjunction with the growth of technology and cited that veterans in rural areas that takes his or her life likely had none or limited access to healthcare services.

“Of the 20 veterans a day who commit suicide, who take their lives, we don't have contact with 14 of those twenty,” he said. Wilkie also described efforts to connect Native veterans to healthcare officials using virtual technologies.

“Let me give you an example of what's happening here in South Dakota on the Standing Rock reservation and in the Cheyenne lands. We've now distributed tablets and computers that allow veterans in those communities to virtually gain access to doctors, nurses, and benefits officers. This allows us to schedule appointments for them and it brings VA a little closer to home. We've started here in South Dakota and we'll expand it. I was up in North Dakota talking to the governor yesterday and we're going to expand it there and to Montana, as well as Wyoming. So those are the kinds of things that we are doing on a national level to change the true trajectory of where Native veterans should be in relation to their VA.”

Wilkie told Indian Country Today how the Mission Act of 2018—which gives more flexibility in the health care facility used by veterans — can be an advantage when choosing a facility. He also talked about family benefits.

“If a veteran has to travel a long distance to a VA facility and that veteran passes community hospitals, urgent care clinics, individual doctors or specialty clinics, we want to make sure that that veteran knows that he or she can use those facilities and that we're not forcing them to travel those hundreds of miles if there's something along the way for them

to use. The other thing that is absolutely vital, and I speak of this as the son of a gravely wounded combat soldier from Vietnam, we finally close the last circle from Vietnam by allowing the families who take care of Vietnam veterans to get financial support and material support to take care of those veterans,” explained Wilkie.

“Vietnam veterans represent the largest portion of our 9.5 million veterans who use veterans' health. I can tell you that we still have a lot of catching up to do. I can remember when my father was a senior officer in the 82nd airborne division of all units and he wasn't even allowed to wear his uniform off the post. So recognizing caregivers, family caregivers for Vietnam veterans is the very least that we can do to finally close some of the circles that opened up.”

Wilkie also stated health professionals are lauding the practice of virtual efforts or telehealth. “I'm not a medical professional. My experience is military and department of defense, but the medical professionals tell me that this is the future in mental health because you're not forcing someone to expose himself or herself in large settings with strangers. You can have them talk to a person in the comfort of a home or familiar setting, a VSO veteran service organization, or a hall. Now, there are some people who will want that direct human contact. But if we provide that kind of variety in those options, I think we will all be better off.”

VA secretary says he's committed to Native Americans, rural veterans

Here's an [article by April Baumgarten](#) which ran in The Forum on October 1. The link also leads to a news VIDEO [3:09]

FARGO — The head of U.S. Veteran Affairs said Tuesday, Oct. 1, he is committed to helping Native American veterans and providing services to rural America, where veterans live in large numbers. VA Secretary Robert Wilkie toured the Fargo VA Hospital on Tuesday morning with Sens. John Hoeven and Kevin Cramer, both Republicans, speaking with patients and medical staff. On Tuesday afternoon, they toured the Healing with Hyperbarics of North Dakota clinic, which uses pressurized chambers filled with pure oxygen to treat patients, in south Fargo.

Both tours were closed to the media, but Wilkie briefly answered reporters' questions at each facility. The Forum asked the three men about veteran services offices being hit with heavier caseloads that are more complicated than in previous years and what the federal government could do to make sure veterans are not left waiting on help for weeks, or even months, at a time.

Wilkie noted rural American and Native American populations are two groups that serve in the armed forces at the greatest numbers. “And for me, that means using this massive budget that we now have to get more creative and get more resources into the areas where



the veterans live," Wilkie said. "So I can tell you on the national level, rural and Native America is my priority."



Click image above to watch the video.

Construction begins for Native American Veterans Memorial on the National Mall

Here's an [article by Kellie Meyer](#) which ran on Nexstar on September 23.



Native Americans who served in our nation's military are set to get a memorial in their honor. It's a memorial that's been more than 25 years in the making and recognizes generations of service.

Kevin Gover, is the Director of the National Museum of the American Indian and he welcomed Native American veterans from across the country at a groundbreaking Saturday for the new Native American Veterans Memorial. "Now and then you just got that little hint that it's about time somebody noticed us," Gover said. It is the first memorial on the grounds of a Smithsonian museum- located right here on the National Mall in Washington D.C. - drawing 24 million visitors a year.

Harvey Pratt's design was selected as the finalist for the memorial. The self-taught Native American artist from Oklahoma also a veteran said he wanted to focus on the spirituality of the native people.

"They were very astute about the environment, the weather, the stars, the moon, the sun and almost everything they did was a ceremony and a prayer. I thought that's how I can reach the 576 federally recognized tribes," Pratt said.

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert Wilkie says these honors are long overdue. "It's about time that we celebrated their sacrifice," Wilkie said.

According to the National Museum of the American Indian - more than 140 thousand veterans identify as Native Americans and more than 31,000 Native Americans, Native Hawaiians and Alaska Natives are currently serving in the US Military.

Remove the Stain Act



Here's some information on legislation intended to rescind each Medal of Honor awarded for acts at Wounded Knee Creek on December 29, 1890. The full text of the 6-page Bill can be found [HERE](#). If you have trouble accessing it, contact Peter.Vicaire@va.gov for a copy.

116TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

H. R. 3467

To rescind each Medal of Honor awarded for acts at Wounded Knee Creek on December 29, 1890, and for other purposes.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

JUNE 25, 2019

Mr. HECK (for himself, Mr. COOK, Mr. HAALAND, Ms. DAVIDS of Kansas, Mr. KILDEE, and Mr. LUJÁN) introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee on Armed Services

A BILL

To rescind each Medal of Honor awarded for acts at Wounded Knee Creek on December 29, 1890, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Remove the Stain
5 Act”.

6 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS.**

7 Congress finds as follows:

8 (1) The Medal of Honor is the highest military
9 award of the United States.



Veteran Benefit Event Hosted by Choctaw Nation

The Choctaw Nation recently hosted a Your Service. Our Mission: Bringing VA Benefits Home VA Claims Event at the Durant headquarters. The Department of Veterans Affairs partnered with the Choctaw Nation to host the VA Claims Events to identify and assist Veterans who may have presumptive disabilities and who might be eligible for a VA pension.

Presumptive disabilities are a condition that VA presumes is related to military service, although the condition may first appear after discharge from the military. These conditions may qualify individuals for VA compensation payments.

Also available during the event was Social Security assistance, help with VA benefits claims, and VA medical center enrollment.

“With the focus on Veterans with presumptive disabilities and those who are pension eligible, VA is hopeful we can help Indian Country Veterans access the full range of benefits they have courageously earned through their service,” said Director Stephanie Birdwell, VA’s Office of Tribal Government Relations.

Assistant Chief Jack Austin Jr. said, “it’s about providing opportunities for our veterans to gain access to the resources that they need.”

Opportunities are not just for veterans, but for their families as well. The VA allows spouses and widows to file for certain claims. “We realize that reaching these Veterans and their spouses could have a direct, tangible impact on their lives,” said Birdwell. “This will help VA enhance and improve the experience for all Veterans and their families.”

On top of the VA benefits, veterans could get more information on the different organizations that could assist them. Several booths of organizations that aid veterans were set up providing information on how they can help.

Vietnam veteran and member of the Choctaw Nation Color Guard, Terry Cole served in an area that was exposed to Agent Orange during Vietnam. He was at the event, hopeful that he could get some help from the VA for health problems he’s experienced that could be related.

Cole echoed the lack of resources that had been mentioned by several others. “For a lot of veterans, there wasn’t anything out there for us years ago. We just didn’t have resources like we do today,” said Cole. Now with the help of the Choctaw Nation and the VA those resources are more readily available.

If you are a veteran in need of assistance, you can call the Veterans Advocacy office at 800-522-6170.

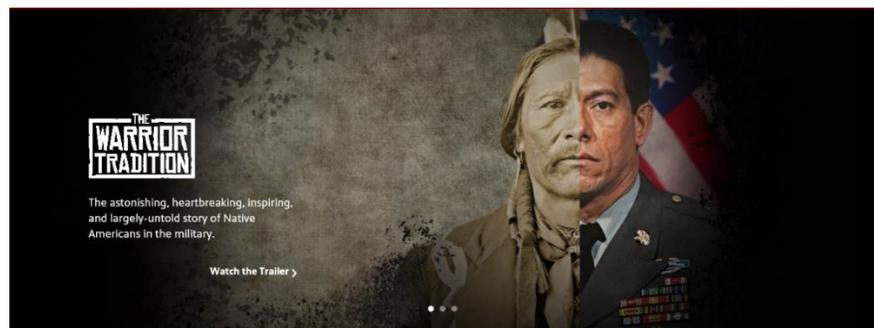


The Warrior Tradition PBS Documentary

[The Warrior Tradition](#) premiered on PBS nationwide on Monday, November 11.

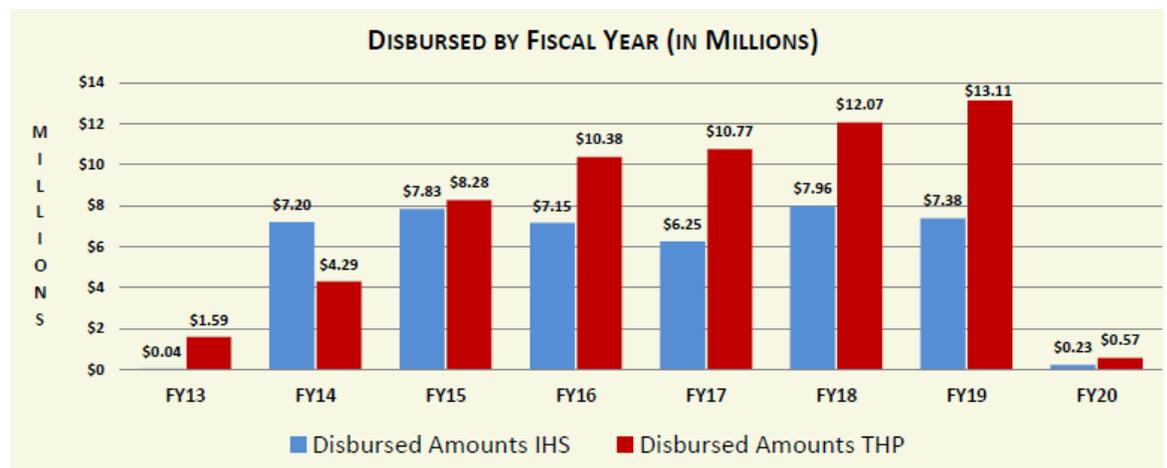
Explore the complicated ways the culture and traditions of Native Americans have affected their participation in the United States military. **The Warrior Tradition** aired on Nov. 11 on PBS. This one-hour documentary, co-produced by WNED-TV Buffalo Toronto and Florentine Films/Hott Productions, Inc., tells the stories of Native American warriors from their own points of view – stories of service and pain, of courage and fear.

Click on the image below to go to the PBS site.



VA Reimburses Over \$105 Million to IHS and Tribal Health Programs

Tribal health programs interested in entering into a reimbursement agreement with VA for serving veterans should send an initial note of interest to: tribal.agreements@va.gov





American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans: Burial Ceremonies and Customs in U.S. National Cemeteries

Here's a link to [27-page report](#) from the Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials, which was published on May 7, 2019. Click on the image below to access the report. If you can't get it, contact Peter.Vicaire@va.gov for a copy.

American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans: Burial Ceremonies and Customs In U.S. National Cemeteries

A Report Presented Through the
Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials,
to the
Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Washington D.C.

By

Joey Strickland and Ed Saunders
Members, Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials
May 7, 2019

Veterans Summit honors the 'ultimate sacrifice' of Gold Star families

smok signalz
independent tribal media

Here's [an article written by Dean Rhodes](#) which ran in Smoke Signals on July 12.

Earning a gold star in school is usually a positive experience. Earning a gold star as a military family definitely isn't.

Gold Star families are so designated because they have lost a family member – husband, wife, sibling or child -- in battle. The seventh annual Veterans Summit: Gathering of Warriors held at uyxat Powwow Grounds on Thursday and Friday, July 11-12, heard from two Gold Star parents who spoke about losing their sons in Afghanistan and Iraq. Yakama Nation Veterans Affairs Program Manager Shawn Marceau (Blackfeet) described the heartbreaking events that occurred after his 22-year-old son's death.

Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Joe Michael Jackson's vehicle drove over an improvised explosive device during Operation Enduring Freedom in the Helmand province of Afghanistan on April 24, 2011.

Marceau said he went from being a Blue Star father (child in battle) to a Silver Star father (child wounded in battle) to a Gold Star father in the space of 20 minutes. "It is the highest honor," Marceau tearfully said during the Veterans Summit on Friday morning. "Even a higher honor than my own service."

Marceau served in the Marine Corps from 1990 to '94 in Desert Storm and Somalia. Marceau recalled how he gave his son a coin before he was deployed to Afghanistan, saying that as long as his son possessed the coin that his father and family would be with him. "That coin was blessed by a lot of people," Marceau said.

However, those blessings did not prevent what all military parents dread: The knock on the door by two Marines wearing full green dress uniforms to deliver the terrible news. "The next 10 days were a total blur," Marceau recalled. He said that he takes solace in knowing that his son's death occurred before Osama Bin Laden was killed in May 2011. "There was still a purpose when my son was killed. He was still hunting the bad guy who did such a terrible thing to our nation," he said. "All of this has changed my life. ... Gold Star families have made the ultimate sacrifice."

Marceau was joined by Shirley Schmunk, who lost her son Jeremiah on July 9, 2004, during an ambush in Iraq while he was deployed with the Army National Guard out of Washington state. After dealing with her grief, she formed Time of Remembrance, a nonprofit organization to help other Gold Star parents deal with their emotions and loss. The organization has a Facebook page.



Both Marceau and Schmunk received standing ovations and hugs following their presentations.

The seventh annual event, first held in Grand Ronde in 2013, started Thursday afternoon with the Grand Ronde Honor Guard bringing in the colors. Tribal Council member Steve Bobb Sr. carried the U.S. flag, Al Miller the Oregon flag, Raymond Petite the eagle staff, Louis Rober the MIA/POW flag and Rich VanAtta the Grand Ronde flag.

Tribal Council Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy, Tribal Council members Denise Harvey and Kathleen George and Secretary Jon A. George on drum accompanied 13 veterans on to the newly installed artificial turf at the powwow grounds. Tribal Council member Jack Giffen Jr. arrived shortly after the opening ceremony.

Navy veteran Nick Sixkiller (Cherokee) reprised his role as master of ceremonies, calling up Charles Tailfeathers (Blackfeet) with the Native Wellness Institute to talk about military trauma and reconnecting to healing.

Army Ranger John Courtney also spoke about his traumatic experiences while serving in Iraq and his arduous road to recovery when he returned to the Warm Springs Reservation. Veteran Gil Calac (Paiute Mission) then shared his story of trauma following his return from the Vietnam War and encouraged attendees to develop some kind of faith to get themselves through the pain.

“After seven years of this summit, now it really makes sense to me to help another veteran heal,” Tailfeathers said. Shalene Joseph (A’aniiih) and Josh Cocker (Tongan/Kiowa) from the Indigenous 20something Project then encouraged attendees to play several “getting to know you” games before they were offered the opportunity to participate in gender-based sweats and sharing circles.

The bulk of the Veterans Summit occurred on Friday with Tribal Council member Steve Bobb Sr., a Vietnam War-era Marine Corps veteran, welcoming perhaps the most attendees ever to a summit. Eighty-six people registered this year and Social Services Director Dana Ainam said she thought more people were in attendance than in previous years. “You are appreciated more than you can ever know,” Bobb said before giving the invocation. “You are the unsung heroes of this great nation. ... We hope this event will bring you peace and a sense of healing.”

Oregon Department of Veterans’ Affairs Director Kelly Fitzpatrick called the powwow grounds a “fabulous venue” and said that events like the Veterans Summit help her small department aid the more than 300,000 veterans in the state. “Our partnerships are indispensable,” she said.

Terry Bentley (Karuk), a 32-year employee with the federal Veterans Affairs Department and regular Veterans Summit participant, thanked the Grand Ronde Tribe for continuing to host the summit and announced that her federal department is forming a Tribal Veterans



Advisory Committee that will give Native American veterans a seat at the table with a direct link to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

Tailfeathers and Air Force veteran Linda Woods (Ottawa/Chippewa) performed the traditional POW/MIA ceremony to remember those who never returned from America's military conflicts.

Woods also brought her eagle staff, which she recently took to Normandy in France and visited five D-Day beaches.

Friday events also concentrated on one of the main goals of the Veterans Summit – getting veterans the benefits that they earned from their military service. A Veterans Affairs panel discussion featured Fitzpatrick, VA Portland Women Veterans Program Manager Sarah Suniga, VA Portland Primary Care Division Director Valdez Bravo, National Cemetery Administration representative Jeff Applegate and Veterans Benefit Administration Public Contact Team Coach Kurtis Harris.

After lunch, scheduled breakout sessions covered such nuts-and-bolts issues as disability compensation claims, spousal and dependent benefits and a Tribal veteran representative workshop.

Surrounding the powwow grounds dancing circle also were a variety of resource tables that included Grand Ronde Health & Wellness employees offering free dental checkups and supplies. In addition, the Tribe's mobile diabetes clinic was in attendance and the Tribe's Emergency Management staff were on hand.

Vietnam War-era Marine Corps veteran Reyn Leno, who committed the Tribe to hosting the Veterans Summit in 2012 while he was on Tribal Council, said the seventh incarnation was well-attended and remains worthwhile.

"I always walk away from this saying if you help one veteran in the two days you do up here, then it's a success," Leno said. "If you can change a person's life just doing this type of stuff, it's a success for me because getting veterans to come forward is difficult. Usually it is their families doing it for them, not them. If we can help one veteran change his life and get what he has coming, I think it is a success."



Camp Chaparral brings together veterans, VA in week of traditional healing

Here's an [article by Justus Caudell](#) which ran in the Tribal Tribune on August 27.

MOUNT ADAMS - During an evening orientation of a veterans' camp at the Yakama Nation's Camp Chaparral, Aug. 11, Yakama elder Willie Salem, a Vietnam War veteran, told those

TRIBAL TRIBUNE

gathered there had been practices traditionally that helped warriors coming home from battle.

Many of those practices were lost with colonization, but they had been there in an understanding of the difficulty for warriors to return home, Salem told the group. "Our old people had searched for a way for when their young people would go to war and come back," said Salem. "When they came back, they came back changed. The old people searched for a way to heal, not only to heal the body but to heal the spirit, the mind, the heart, the soul. Our elder people, they were really good at it. They knew what they were doing when it came to psychological traumas."

The message set a tone for a week-long Camp Chaparral, which brought together tribal veterans from around the Pacific Northwest, along with Gold Star families and VA employees for an intensive camp at a Yakama Nation facility in the foot hills of Mount Adams, Aug. 11-17.

"Each and everyone of us here has baggage," said Colville tribal elder Soy Redthunder, a Vietnam War Veteran who worked as a spiritual leader in one of four groups (called families) at the camp. "We have that baggage we're packing. When we leave here, hopefully some of that baggage is gone. All of that is part of this week, when you get back to your place, whether you're working or whether you're retired, you'll feel better when you get back from Camp Chaparral."

Sunday evening as part of the orientation, the large group broke into four different families, and through the week, those families gathered for long sessions based in cultural issues and healing.

On Monday morning, the group held a flag ceremony after a prayer song, presenting the United States flag and then raising the eagle staff. Following the flag ceremony, the veterans of each branch of the military presented their individual branch colors: The Army, the Marines, the Navy, the Air Force and the Coast Guard. A POW flag was also raised.

Three veterans conducted the setting of the POW/ MIA table, explaining the meaning of the white table cloth, the empty chairs, the empty plates, the lemon slices, the salt, the flipped over wine glasses and other details.

The group gathered in a large circle, and opened the camp. The camp first started in the early 1990s, said Terri Bentley, Veterans Affairs Tribal Government Relations Specialist for the Western Region. The Northwest American Indian Veteran Advisory Council had been formed to bring together different government agencies, including tribes, across the Pacific Northwest.

"The whole point was recognizing that these agencies were falling short in working with American Indian and Alaskan Native veterans and their families," said Bentley, who noted this was particularly true with the VA. "AI/NA members served at a higher numbers per capita than other ethnicities, but they weren't seeking VA services."

TRIBAL TRIBUNE

“Every place we went, the VA or the state, they always shut us down,” said group coordinator Frank Cordero. “They told us, ‘You have Indian Health Service, go to IHS. Don’t bother us.’ When we’d go to IHS, they’d turn us down.” Subcommittees formed under the advisory council, focusing on things like housing, employment and health care. From one subcommittee, focused on PTSD and mental health, the idea developed to bring together practitioners and native veterans, said Bentley.

“We talked about getting them to understand what it is to serve Native American veterans,” said Cordero. “They didn’t understand Native American veterans are unique. You take a veteran that they treat normally, not realizing he’s a native veteran. They don’t understand he might be different. What works on normal veterans doesn’t necessarily work on native veterans.” A number of tribal member combat veterans, came together with open-minded leadership at the VA who recognized the agency’s shortfall in serving tribal veterans.

That idea resulted in Camp Chaparral, which is hosted by the Yakama Nation’s Veteran Affairs Program. In total, 60 VA employees from eight different VA offices around the region are selected to attend the camp and sit alongside the native veterans in the various activities.

“I come from a family of veterans,” said Bentley. “But when you are not a veteran, and you’re working with veterans, you can’t relate in the same way. I think camp helped me early on realizing how important the work is that we do helping veterans and their families. It’s about having the ability to understand just a little more.”

There are so many of our employees who lose sight of why we are there,” continued Bentley. “This is a really good grounding tool for that, especially when you start to hear these veterans’ stories, what they’ve done for this country and how it has impacted their lives, how it has impacted their family’s lives and that ripple effect with how trauma works. It helps you get it. Even if you’re not a veteran, this is important work.”

Along with the daily family gatherings, the group sweated twice each day and participated in other cultural activities. At the end of the week, the group held a traditional feast, small powwow and a welcome home ceremony. Wednesday, elders conducted a Washat ceremony.

“People that are working to help other people heal, they themselves need to be well,” said Bentley “If they have issues, hurt, things they’re still battling, then it is important they resolve those issues.”



First-of-their-kind Studies Create Pathways to Homeownership for Native American Veterans

See the South Dakota Native Homeownership Coalition [WEBSITE HERE](#).

Three tribal housing entities in South Dakota – [Cheyenne River Housing Authority](#), [Oglala Sioux \(Lakota\) Housing](#), and [Sisseton Wahpeton Housing Authority](#) – recently completed veterans housing needs and homeownership studies in cooperation with their Tribal Veterans Service Officers (TVSOs) in order to identify the housing and service issues most important to veterans on each reservation and to be able to develop tailored programs to help address these collective concerns. It is the first time studies of this caliber have been conducted, and the undertaking is already manifesting results in a number of ways. “Everything we do is data driven, and it’s hard to find numbers on the reservation. We always ran into the same problem with lack of data,” explains Robert Dunsmore, Tribal Veterans Service Officer (TVSO) for Cheyenne River.

Dunsmore says having their study on hand helped them win a grant award that will support veterans housing projects. “Now we can show the need,” he says. Echoing Dunsmore, Geri Opsal, the TVSO for Sisseton, expresses difficulty in accessing funding for veterans’ programs because of a lack of data. “We have to collect data. It’s going to back us up on any endeavor we take on,” she says.

Data published in the studies was collected on each of the reservations through a survey and a focus group involving veterans from a number of different service periods. Tawney Brunsch, Executive Director of Lakota Funds, who participated in the Pine Ridge data collection efforts, says the focus group was especially beneficial. “It was solution-oriented discussion for things we could do collaboratively,” she says. “And through some of the connections we made at that meeting, we had a veteran close a home loan last week.”

The Pine Ridge study inspired the development of and helped obtain essential funding to launch Lakota Funds’ new matched savings program designed provide down payment assistance for Native American veterans. One participant has already enrolled in the program.

The matched savings program will also provide one-on-one assistance to help Native veterans through the homeownership process, something that Kevin Klingbeil, Managing Director at Big Water Consulting (the firm that conducted the studies), says is a critical finding in the studies.

“One of the key things that has helped Native vets be successful in purchasing a home was having someone who cared and who helped walk them through the process and the paperwork,” says Klingbeil.



Opsal says the Veteran’s Affairs Native American Direct Loan (NADL) is a great mortgage product because it has such a low interest rate, but the process can be arduous and people need encouragement to keep moving through it. She hopes to utilize the studies to inform policies that will streamline the NADL process.

Dunsmore sees the baseline data provided in the studies as a beginning. “We’re moving in the right direction. It’s time to start showing things – not talking about it. Once we start showing what we can do, better things will come.”

Klingbeil says, “We treated this project as the first of its kind so that we could create a model survey instrument. Then other groups or tribes could use it going forward.” The South Dakota Native Homeownership Coalition commissioned the studies with funding support from Enterprise Community Partners and plans to launch a second round of studies sometime in the future. In the near-term, the Coalition will provide a platform for collaboration to explore strategies that will increase homeownership rates for Native American veterans throughout the state.

“We’re creating this baseline through the Coalition, and we’re going to build from that. One of our immediate actions will be collaborating with other TVSOs,” says Opsal.

Take a Look at the Studies!

Download each reservation’s report by clicking on the images below:



Cloquet veteran receives first VA-backed home loan on Fond du Lac Reservation



Here’s an [article by Andee Erickson](#) which ran in the Pine Journal on August 15

David Danielson of Cloquet officially became the first veteran to receive a Department of Veterans Affairs home loan for a house on the Fond du Lac Reservation at a signing Wednesday, Aug. 7. The small gathering happened more than two decades after Danielson helped establish an agreement between the VA and the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa that allows veterans to receive VA-backed home loans on federal trust land.

“I’m so happy today, I just can’t believe it. I’m tingling,” Danielson said at the signing. “It’s a wonderful feeling.”



Danielson served in the U.S. Marines in Cambodia more than four decades ago, but his records did not reflect his service until about three years ago. After years of trying to get his paperwork corrected, his efforts didn't produce results until he reached out to former U.S. Rep. Rick Nolan about straightening out his records.

That meant that until recently, Danielson couldn't take advantage of veteran benefits like the VA's home loan program, which he helped bring to Fond du Lac when he did legal research for the band.

To purchase his three-bedroom, 28-by-56-foot modular home from Ideal Homes in Barnum using the loan program, Danielson didn't have to pay a down payment and he has a low interest rate on his fixed mortgage. He did, however, have to clear any outstanding debt he had with the federal government, have a minimum credit score and verify proper income.

Lynn Reynolds, a leasing specialist with the resource management department at Fond du Lac, mediated between Danielson and the VA during the nearly two-year process. Since there aren't many lenders on trust land, Reynolds said the VA's Native American Direct Loan (NADL) program can open a new door for veterans exploring home financing options on the reservation, including older veterans.

"There are veterans who don't think they're qualified because they're older," Reynolds said. "They think it's too late."

Dave Hein, who works in loan production with the VA, guided Danielson through the signing and spoke on the importance of the NADL program, saying that it's a way to level the playing field for veterans on tribal trust land, where the VA's commercial lenders can't practice.

"We're just trying to make sure Dave (Danielson) from Cloquet and Dave (Hein) from St. Michael have the same benefit coming out the end," he said. "There we go," Danielson said.

Since the NADL program started in 1992, more than 1,000 loans have been made to Native American veterans. Twenty-three of those were made in fiscal year 2018.

Danielson hopes that his experience receiving a home loan can show other veterans in Fond du Lac and elsewhere in the nation that the VA home loan program is a viable option. "It's a government to government relationship that should keep moving forward," Danielson said. "I'm so glad it's here now at Fond du Lac and that I'm involved with it. I just love it."

Reynolds said that veterans looking to learn more about VA-backed home loan opportunities on the Fond du Lac Reservation can contact Fond du Lac Reservation Resource Management's land information department at 218-878-7128.



100 Faces of War Experience

Daniel M. Bearrunner, Legislative Liaison, Oglala Sioux Tribe, was recently highlighted in the "100 Faces of War Experience." His page can be accessed [HERE](#).



Navy, Petty Officer First Class, Naval Aircrewman, Prison Security, Camp Bucca, Iraq
4/07-1/08 -- Words Provided in 2014



Quote from Chief Tecumseh (Poem from Act of Valor)

"So live your life that the fear of death can never enter your heart. Trouble no one about their religion; respect others in their view, and demand that they respect yours. Love your life, perfect your life, beautify all things in your life. Seek to make your life long and its purpose in the service of your people. Prepare a noble death song for the day when you go over the great divide.

Always give a word or a sign of salute when meeting or passing a friend, even a stranger, when in a lonely place. Show respect to all people and grovel to none. When you arise in the morning give thanks for the food and for the joy of living. If you see no reason for giving thanks, the fault lies only in yourself. Abuse no one and no thing, for abuse turns the wise ones to fools and robs the spirit of its vision.

When it comes your time to die, be not like those whose hearts are filled with the fear of death, so that when their time comes they weep and pray for a little more time to live their lives over again in a different way. Sing your death song and die like a Lakota Warrior going home."

Note Changed one word in last sentence from Hero to Lakota Warrior



Q & A: Veteran Service Officers, Veterans Program Leadership and Staff: Serving the Men and Women Who Served Us

Please share a little about yourself, your tribal affiliation

My name is Rodney Loonsfoot and I'm from the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community. I served 2 years in the Michigan National Guard (from 1982- 1984) then served on active duty for 9 years in the U.S. Marine Corps from 1984-1993. I blew out my shoulders in Somalia and was discharged due to my disabilities. I'm an elected tribal council member and I also serve as the Tribal Veterans Service Officer (TVSO) for our community. I'm the first person in Michigan to be appointed by a tribe as a TVSO.

How long have you worked serving the Veterans of your community?

I worked off and on for a 6 to 8-year stint before I moved, then when I came back I picked it up again. I organized our first tribal Veterans group honor guard. Ours was the first in Michigan and now we're one of two to three tribal honor guards in the state. I've been asked by other communities to help organize their honor guards in recent years.

Tell us about the work you do/your program - what does a day in your life look like?

There are more and more Vets coming out of the woodwork and asking for support these days. We have over 100 Vets here and I'm working with 20-30 of them. The numbers are growing and I don't turn anyone away. We honor those who serve from the time they are brand new to the services (like my Nephew who recently joined the Navy) to when they come home and all the way down to the very end of their time served by providing burial honors for tribal Veterans. We tweaked the Legion's protocol and put a tribal spin on it by using both the tribal flag and the American flag.

Are you an accredited service officer?

I am a member of a national Veteran Service Organization and I worked through the state of Michigan to become an accredited service officer through the VA (Office of General Counsel). The accredited service officer is one side of serving Veterans and there are also tribal veteran representatives "TVRs." The TVSO and the TVR are like apples and oranges. They are different titles and serve similar but different functions for veterans.

A gentleman who works for the VA, his name is Buck Richardson, provides annual training for tribal veteran representatives (TVRs) or others from tribal communities who are interested in learning more about services and benefits available to veterans. The training focuses on providing up to date information (VA 101 type information) for the TVRs (interviewer note: in some regional locations, TVRs do serve as TVSOs, but the training offered by Mr. Richardson, who works for the Veterans Health Administration and the term



“TVR” that Councilman Loonsfoot is using in the context of this interview refers to veteran service providers who do not assist with claims but serve in more of a resource, referral and in some instances case management type capacity for veterans living in the local community).

When it comes to the TVSOs, that is a whole different monster. You have to be accredited through a national Veteran Service Organization, through the VA (OGC) or through the state (if the state department of veterans’ affairs is a Veteran Service Organization) where you live, which is what I did in my state, Michigan. I went through accreditation training passed a test that they administered and became an accredited service officer recognized by the VA (OGC). There is a VA regulatory requirement for an accredited service officer to work 20 hours a week and be paid. The Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency (MVAA - a state agency) staff helped me navigate the VA process to obtain accreditation. I was fortunate that as elected (tribal) official I was able to volunteer my time and not have to meet the “paid” regulatory requirement, so I do work this TVSO work as a volunteer. Michigan recognizes me as a TVSO so I serve as Power of Attorney (POA), where the veteran signs a form authorizing MVAA and me to serve as their agent for purposes of claims representation. Everything I do as a TVSO is acting on behalf of the MVAA as a service officer.



The MVAA will and I have been successful working on many claims so far. The MVAA helps me to maintain my accreditation annually by offering a state sponsored conference that I attend. There is a large disconnect between the state and tribes when it comes to TVSOs.

The TVSOs are not included in any state appropriations or counties when the state allocates funds to counties. Tribes are not eligible for state grants that come out, even technology grants to counties...the county will get funds but tribes are denied funding from MVAA because we aren’t listed in the appropriation. Any start-up funds, part time grants for funding and so on, tribes are ineligible for this and there is a big issue with this that I often speak out. A friendly amendment to the state appropriations legislation which would provide for tribes to be on the same level and receive those funds to support service officers through the state, but right now there is no will on the part of the state to change the situation. This is like the lottery amount that is split across counties. Tribes are not



factored into the appropriations; we have to go through our state legislative representatives to introduce this in the legislation but we've hit a wall.

Why are tribal veteran services officers important and how do they help veterans?

In Michigan, there is a disconnect between tribes and county Veteran organizations. In each county there is a Veterans board which is supposed to serve all members of the county. Funding is tight and there are limited resources so tribal members have a hard time dealing with state and county bureaucracy, red tape and prejudice. There are years of history. Tribal veteran representatives often have a hard time coming forward to advocate for benefits for themselves to the county. There's no sense going to another white man office to fill out paperwork. I know a lot of vets who won't go to county guys because of all of that, but some do.

If I had to say the biggest issue, it would be the county attitude that tribes have money and we (county) don't need to fund them. We have never had a tribal member working for the county. There was the American Legion guy tribal member on the board but on the board through the Legion, not in his role as a tribal representative. The county board doesn't want tribal representation on the county board. The county board doesn't want to change their bylaws because of prejudice. My county is no different from any other Michigan county. Some accept Indian people and the racial prejudice isn't bad other counties it is. It is a slap in the face not to have a tribal VSO appointed to the county board.

There is another side to this and that is that in Michigan they have a veterans trust fund. It's a pot of money that allocates grant awards through criteria set forth by the trust fund board. There has not been any activity on this trust fund in our county for years because of the hoops and red tape that go along with accessing this fund.

What is the difference between accredited vs. not accredited?

When you are an accredited service officer, you're able to act on behalf of a Veteran through their POA and contact the VA directly to share information, change information, updates, check on claim status get forms etc. to expedite Veterans claims. Now the TVR (not accredited) is a valuable resource to the tribes because they can share basic information about services and benefits with tribal members and Vets but falls short of being able to act on claims because they have to refer Vets to an accredited service officer.

What has been the best part of your job? What has been the most challenging or difficult part of your job?

The most challenging part has been dealing with bureaucracy, red tape, prejudice of county and state. We should be on same level as state and when it comes to appropriations; tribes should be included. The state should add tribes in appropriations because we are taking care of Vets. We could help a lot more and not feel isolated in our work with vets. I do a lot of fund raising and came up with \$9,000 last year through frybread dinners and goulash sales. I hate to see Vietnam Vets scrambling to get their DD-214 and they have maybe six



months left to live because they have cancer due to Agent Orange exposure. Then there are a number of Korean Vets having a hard time navigating the system and there is still the belief things haven't changed.

The best part is the honor guard and a combination of carrying eagle staffs, representing Veterans going as far as I can with their claim then hearing from the Vet that they received 100% unemployment eligibility so they don't have to worry and have access to care and benefits they need. I saw a 74- year-old grandma, she received her pension from when her husband passed. I enjoy being able to take the veterans to their appointments in the vehicle donated to the tribe by a generous non-profit called Wounded Warrior Family Support.

Anything else you'd like to share?

There are a lot of very highly experienced service officers out there and there are a lot of communities that have ramped up their veteran programs and taken off. I want to see the VA take a larger role in helping Veterans through culture-based therapy and traditional ceremonies, sweat lodges, etc. offered within the VA health care system. Some VA facilities have these culturally competent services while some do not.

An idea for something therapeutic is that we have no active commercial fishing operations going on. Perhaps if VA had the opportunity to do a pilot program or seed sustainable business that could take off by itself and create cultural content best practice, a bunch of things that could be done. I would love to plant more seeds and ideas.



Q & A: Veteran Service Officers, Veterans Program Leadership and Staff: Serving the Men and Women Who Served Us

Please share a little about yourself, your tribal affiliation

My name is Margaret "Muggs" Garvin, Ho-Chunk Nation (HCN).

Are you a Veteran or do you have family/extended family members who served?

I am a US Navy veteran and I served from April 1988 – August 1992. I was extended 4 months beyond my original contract. My dad, several aunts and uncles were veterans (almost all are deceased), my stepdad is a veteran as well. My ex mother-in-law was a veteran too. We got along great up until she passed. May she rest in peace.

How long have you worked serving the Veterans of this community?

I worked as a Veterans Service Officer for almost 4 years (this time) - since Nov 2, 2015. The first time I served the veterans of the HCN was as the Outreach Specialist in the year 2000, then again in 2002 as the Office Manager. The HCN Veterans Affairs office was shut down for a bit. I worked with several veterans of the community to bring the office back,



but not as an Executive Department. I explained to them that if Veterans Affairs was a Division – under an Executive Department the office would have a bigger chance of survival from a political standpoint.

Tell us about the work you do/your program – what does a day in the life look like?

I was a County Veterans Service Officer (CVSO) from 2006 – 2008, then again from Jan 2014 - Oct 2015, for the county I live in and the neighboring county. While I was there, I learned everything and became an accredited Veterans Service Officer with many Veterans Service Organizations. I was able to file claims, sign forms on behalf of veterans and gain access to their files online through a VA program.

When I was offered the position for HCN, after interviews, I tried my best to bring the same environment and knowledge as a CVSO – actual office. We do, offer the same benefits and time for veterans, but not nearly as often as a CVSO office. The majority of our office assists veterans financially. We also plan, and participate in several Veterans Events, holidays, etc. A lot of public relations-related work reaching Veterans.

Approximately how many Veterans live within or near the community? Do you have an idea as to era of service, gender?

Approximately 320 for HCN. Now in Jackson County, where HCN headquarters is located, there are 1907 veterans; while in nearby Monroe County there are 5196 veterans. We're not able to differentiate how many veterans are actually Ho-Chunk. The Ho-Chunk people are like nomads. They move from city to city quite often. As a child I attended 5 different schools my year of 1st grade. 45 years later, they are still on the move.

Are you affiliated with any national Veteran Service Organization(s)?

I am affiliated with American Legion Andrew Blackhawk Post 129, County Veteran Service Officers Association -Wisconsin, and the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers.

What steps did you have to follow to become a Veteran Service Officer?

The county jobs prepared me for the tribal job. I applied for Jackson County in 2006, showed them my heart, and the Veterans really supported to get the job. I was hired by Jackson County. Then years later I went for Monroe County and on to HCN. I maintained my accreditation and fulfilled the current position as best as I could.

Why are service officers important, how do they help Veterans?

Service officers work with Veterans face to face, they show compassion. We get the veteran to open up, trust us and tell us their story. They share with us personal situations they don't want share with family.



What is the difference between accredited and/or certified?

When you're accredited, you are able to file claims with the VA for them. You can sign forms for them after an original claim has been made. Accredited service officers have access to VA programs, such as VBMS, Share, Capri, Vacols.

What has been the best part of your job? What has been the most challenging or difficult part of your job?

Knowing I am doing the best I can to help veterans who need and deserve the benefits that they wouldn't normally ask for, like major back pay after the claim was approved, handicapped accessible vehicles, handicap accessibility modifications made to the veterans home. The most difficult is trying to help veterans knowing they're sick, becoming close to them and then having them pass on.

Muggs can be reached at: Margaret.Garvin@ho-chunk.com or via phone at: 715-284-4563/800-294-9343 Ext. 1353



Q & A: Veteran Service Officers, Veterans Program Leadership and Staff: Serving the Men and Women Who Served Us



Please share a little about yourself, your tribal affiliation

My name is Eugene (Geno) Talas. I was raised on the Hopi Indian Reservation and graduated from Tuba City High School, class of 1974. I'm from the village of Moenkopi and I am Bamboo/Reed clan. I served 30 years in the United States Air Force.

Do you have family/extended family members who served?

My Dad served in the Air Force and I grew up a military brat. We traveled with him to South Carolina, Nebraska, Japan, from the time I was born until I was 10 years old. When we came home from my Dad's time in service, I couldn't speak Hopi and I had a South Carolina drawl which I learned from our last station. I slowly re-integrated into the Hopi way and grew to learn the traditions. Growing up I learned bits and pieces of the language, enough to get by, but it wasn't until I retired from the Air Force that I began improving my Hopi language skills which came in handy when speaking to elderly Hopi Vets. I also learn from them when we talk. Having that shared tribal perspective through language creates a bridge, a connection and trust that comes when working with someone who has a shared tribal perspective from within the community.



As for family members who served, my clan uncle was in the Air Force. Then my cousin, his daughter serves in the Air Force in a special helicopter unit. I've had other relatives serve in the other branches, Navy, Army, Marines, etc.

How long have you worked serving the Veterans of this community?

Once I retired in 2004, I worked for a while as a kindergarten teacher's aide at the Moenkopi Day School. In 2008, I started working as the manager for the Hopi Veterans Services Program and have been here ever since, so 11 years now.

Tell us about the work you do/your program - what does a day in the life look like?

The Hopi Veterans program has a staff of 3 - myself, Hanna Polwytewa, Secretary II and Stephanie, client transporter. Our office is located in Kykotsmovi, Arizona and between the three of us we coordinate veterans' services for the entire community which is located on 1.5 million acres across 12 villages located in Northeastern Arizona. The issues run across a wide spectrum and we do our best to serve everyone. We also work on veterans legacy projects such as commemorating Hopi Code Talker Day which is April 21.

Approximately how many Veterans live within or near the community? Do you have an idea as to era of service, gender?

There are an estimated 800 veterans from Hopi including 200 off the reservation. This doesn't include the active duty numbers. There are more male veterans than female. Of the total estimated, approximately 25-30 are female veterans that we know are out there and encouraged to come see us.

When it comes to Hopi veterans, we established a formal enrollment process for our office. We create a case file folder for the veterans. When they contact us, we'll reach out to local departments like the county or the Arizona Department of Veterans Services (AZDVS) so we can obtain and maintain copies of the veterans DD-214 (record of service) in their case file. The veteran keeps the original and we maintain a copy. In some instances, the wait time to obtain a veteran's DD-214 can be more than two months. In 1973 there was a fire at the archives warehouse in St. Louis that maintains records so it can take longer to track down records from the 1950s and 1960s.

The veteran is issued a Hopi veterans enrollment card. We keep two source documents on file and the veteran can add to it. We'll make copies and put it in the file system. We abide by a confidentiality policy and maintain all records under lock and key. If the veteran is in the Phoenix area or elsewhere, away from Hopi, they can send us a signed release of



information and we can fax any information in their record to where ever they are. We maintain files for deceased veterans as well.



What is a day in the life like for you and the Hopi Veterans program team?

Hanna works up front and serves as the first intake point of contact for the veterans or people coming in with inquiries. Sometimes they request to meet with me privately and we'll discuss what their needs are, if they need to apply for their DD-214 using an SF-180 form. We'll find out if they're interested in VA health care and if so, we help with enrollment in VA healthcare, we fax the forms to the Prescott, Arizona VA health care system. By afternoon or the next day, we get a response about their eligibility. We'll also visit with them about if they wish to pursue a claim for compensation or pension benefits. We have an arrangement with the AZDVS to help our veterans apply for their benefits. We purchased a \$70.00 webcam and the AZDVS coordinator gives us a link via email. We schedule benefits appointments for veterans and hold the appointment in our office via a webcam session. The veterans are able to converse with an accredited veterans service officer through our computer screen.

Some days, there might be an inquiry for burial assistance. We have a burial intake process. Hopis bury using a three-day pattern. We coordinate full military honors for veterans working with the specific military branch of services to assist the family and coordinating with our local Lori Piestewa Post 80. I also present flags to the next of kin. Once the family has some time to mourn, we assist with the death certificate, requests for a headstone and any reimbursement for burial benefits. We function like a mini-VA helping to connect veterans and their families to immediate resources if possible.

We transport all veterans to their VA appointments, traveling to two clinics in Flagstaff and Phoenix or clinics in Show Low, Polacca, etc. We have one dedicated driver scheduling transports and put approximately 16,000 miles on the vehicles in one year. Some trips are local, some can be an 8-10 hour round trip in one day. When it comes to compensation and pension physical exams, we don't want the vets to ever miss these appointments because VA isn't able to adjudicate final service-connected eligibility status without these exams. Winter conditions can be difficult and when it comes to bad weather, I or Hannah will go with the driver during the transport to be safe.

Are you a service officer?

I am not a service officer. I was approached about doing that, but the connection that we have with the AZDVS via webcam is effective for us and meets our needs. There are other



Arizona tribes that went through service officer trainings held at their tribal locations, but I know there are also some tribes like us that work with AZDVS



Are you affiliated with a national Veteran Service Organization?

By proxy, a member of our local Lori Piestewa American Legion Post 80 is affiliated with “the Legion.”

What has been the best part of your job? What has been the most challenging or difficult part of your job?

The best part of my job has been connecting daily with veterans, finding out their family ties. It’s great coming to work daily and having all of the staff make a difference in veterans’ lives through the services that are available. It’s the best job I could have, knowing I’m here to help interpret and translate for the veterans who need that support. The most challenging part is the rural setting. It’s hard to get necessary connections. There are housing needs, ramps, fixtures that could be modified, but the VBA doesn’t have staff readily available to come and assess what improvements and modifications are necessary to improve housing. We’ve had a hard time connecting with the VBA Special Adapted Housing program.

All of that said, our traditions and culture are assets in working on addressing some of these issues. Another challenge is the nature of tribal revenue. Our program funding is tenuous, and this is a source of anxiety for myself and our team. We wonder at times what the future holds for the Hopi Veterans Services Program. We were fortunate to receive a donated new Ford Explorer from Wounded Warrior Family Support (WWFS) that we use for veteran transport services. The WWFS organization also provided us with \$20,000 to use for program operating costs and outreach efforts. This helped our program with costs for at least two more years. Two more years of serving veterans...hopefully there will be many more.

Anything else you’d like to share?

I’d like to send a “shout out” to the other Native American Veteran Service Officers and program staff. Keep pushing and keep going. Native veterans need someone to advocate on their behalf. Keep pushing and working to learn who to reach out to, identify your support mechanism. If you need to reach out to me and ask how we did it here at Hopi, we’re happy to help, just call or email us.

Geno can be reached at: ETalas@hopi.nsn.us or via phone at (928) 734-3461



Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Indians and VA Office of Tribal Government Relations held a Veteran Fall Gathering

Submitted by OTGR's own Terry Bentley.



On October 30, 2019, the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Indians and VA Office of Tribal Government Relations held a Veteran Fall Gathering to honor Tribal Veterans and their families. The event opened with posting colors by the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Indians Color Guard and opening remarks by Veteran Tribal Chairman, Dan Courtney and Veteran Tribal Councilman, Robert VanNorman.



The event included special guest speakers from VA Roseburg Healthcare System, VA Southern Oregon Rehabilitation Center and Clinics, Oregon State Department of Veterans Affairs, and the local Douglas County Veteran Service Officer. Approximately 28 Veterans and family attended the event, along with 24 VA staff providing resources for services and benefits to Veterans. These events continue to enhance government-to-government relationships as described in VA Policy for Tribal Consultation.

Borne The Battle Podcast: Dr. Robert Primeaux



Hosted by Marine Corps Veteran Tanner Iskra, [Borne the Battle](#) recognizes each battle, challenge, and sacrifice our Veterans endure during and after their service, as well as spotlighting important resources, offices, and benefits VA offers our Veterans.

Native American Vietnam Veteran Robert Primeaux shared his journey from a Lakota reservation to the Army and even to Hollywood. As a young man, Primeaux was eager to get off the reservation and see the world. To leave, he decided to join the Army. He trained



in Fort Lewis and Fort Knox before joining the 101st Airborne Division and sent off to Vietnam.

In 1972, Primeaux returned to the United States. His younger brother had been killed in a car accident, leaving Primeaux as the sole male survivor of his family. However, he did not stay in the Army long. A car accident of his own put him in a coma for three weeks. After he recovered, he was discharged.



Primeaux then lived on his grandmother's ranch while he recovered from his injuries. To help with his recovery, he began to self-rehab by working with the horses on the ranch. His love for horses gave him the opportunity to go to school through a rodeo scholarship from the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association (NIRA).

Between school and living on his family ranch, Primeaux met Michael Apted on the set of Thunderheart in South Dakota. Through this meeting, he landed a stunt role on Thunderheart and become eligible for access to the Union of the Screen Actors Guild. Later, Robert moved to LA to begin his film career where he landed roles in Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman and a more prominent role in Rough Riders. This role as Indian Bob was special to Primeaux because the director John Milius specifically created it with him in mind.

Recently, Robert has been advocating for fallen service-members to be enshrines in the NFL Hall of Fame.

PBS Documentary - Connecting Our Generations: Voices of Native Veterans



Check out the link below for a 30-minute PBS documentary on the annual [National Gathering of American Indians](#), which takes place in Wheaton, Illinois. The 2020 dates have been set for July 17-19. For more information on this event contact Joe Podlasek at joep@trickstergallery.com

Native American veterans are asked to reflect on the military, their culture, and the connections they make with other veterans.



Veterans are Praising Spokane VA Staff for Housing Assistance and Support Programs

By Bret Bowers, Public Affairs Officer
Mann-Grandstaff VAMC, Spokane, WA
June 2019



Life after the military becomes a new mission for all Veterans, including Joseph Harrison, a former active duty Army Air Defense Artilleryman (OIF-OEF), who later, received training as a combat medic during his stint in the Army National Guard. He succeeded and quickly rose through the ranks with specialized training and rapid promotions.

“I wish I would have stayed in, because I would have been much more mature because even though I was 26 when I got out, I felt like I was still 20. The Army and combat weren’t that bad,” smiled this Native American Veteran now enrolled at Spokane Community College and starting his life over through the VA’s Tribal HUD-VASH program. HUD-VASH stands for the Dept. of





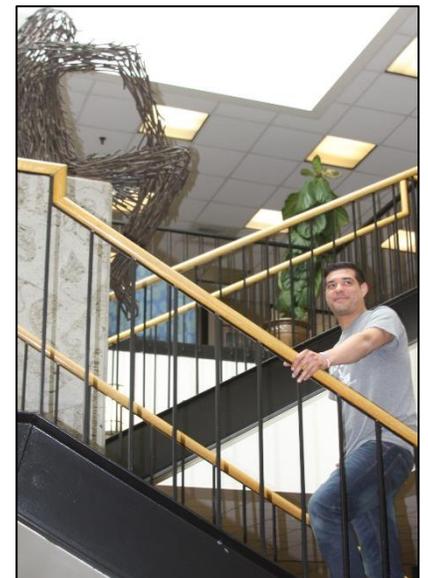
Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and VA Supported Housing (VASH) program to assist Veterans and their families.

Thankfully, the program is designed to get Veterans the help they need to get back on track. Since separating from the military, Harrison has overcome brushes with the law, substance abuse, and difficulty maintaining relationships. He is doing so now, by staying committed to the goals he set for himself. But he admits, he “isn’t doing it alone.”

He continues to receive support from VA mental health professional Heidi Stewart, who is also Harrison’s Tribal HUD-VASH Case Manager. “There are going to be people out there who say they want to help Veterans, but Heidi goes well beyond that standard,” he said.

“Thanks to Heidi and VA, my life and outlook are way better now,” he smiled, while taking a break from classes teaching him to become an Information Technology (IT) network manager - to meet with Heidi in the SCC Student “Lair”. “I have so much more in front of me now, including an amazing girlfriend, a beautiful 18-month old Son, and another baby on the way together.”

Joseph’s personal drive coupled with VA case management, are keeping him looking forward rather than the rear-view mirror. “We all go through rough patches, but to my fellow Veterans, I say if you want it, you can take it. Give VA another shot at helping you.”



In 2018, Joseph began seeing what success looked like with VA. He and his girlfriend attended the 9th Annual American Indian Veterans Advisory Council’s Veterans Memorial and Honoring Ceremony at Spokane’s Mann-Grandstaff VAMC. He was there taking part in honoring and assisting fellow Veterans and their families. He also helped Heidi share information and give-aways with event attendees.



Then, Heidi helped find a suitable place Joseph wanted to live. Most recently, he joined Heidi for her Tribal HUD-VASH celebration in the Veterans Healing Garden at the medical center, honoring Veterans who also say they're lives have changed immensely "for the better... because of VA."

Nationwide, there are 30 Tribal HUD-VASH programs. MGVAMC has two staff (including Heidi) who assist Veterans. Some live on the reservations in Nespelem and Wellpinit, WA and others on the Lapwai and Plummer, ID reservations. For the Spokane Tribal HUD-VASH program, Heidi is also authorized to help Native American Veterans from other Tribe's achieve their goals and dreams through housing and support.



Tribal HUD-VASH is currently benefitting Joseph and 20+ other Veterans in the Spokane area in need of housing assistance and support to prevent former military men and women from the cycle of homelessness, despair, and substance abuse.



Instead, Stewart works to develop a respectful relationship with Veterans to support them towards gainful employment, housing, and VA health care.

At MGVAMC's recent Tribal HUD-VASH Celebration in May, Stewart and Harrison were joined by dozens of other Veterans, the Spokane Indian Housing Authority, and VA leadership –

to further encourage the success Veterans are finding through VA.

Melissa Richardson, a former Naval Aviation Warfare specialist described moving to Spokane in the winter and living out of her vehicle – until she met Heidi.

"I never planned to get married and then become homeless with a child, fearing I would lose my daughter. If it weren't for Heidi and HUD-VASH, we would have been forced to live in a storage unit," described Richardson, wiping away her tears. "Heidi found us an apartment. She gave us hope. The VA is so much more than inpatient care."





At the celebration, another Veteran named “Ralph” praised the VA for “saving my life.” He survived heart surgery and is effectively managing his diabetes – after having used VA services in Spokane, Seattle, and Wisconsin. “No matter where I’ve been, VA has helped me and that’s why I’m here to thank the VA.”



Office of Native American Program’s HUD representative, Greg Roe remains impressed with what he is seeing. “This is a personally inspiring event – reminding us why we do the work that we do to – to help Veterans get back on their feet and feeling good about themselves and whatever tomorrow may bring.”



Navy Veteran “Pistol Pete” of the Nez Perce Tribe of Idaho, describes HUD-VASH and Stewart as “blessings in our lives, because without Heidi, I wouldn’t be here today. I believe the Creator looks after those who do good things for other people, and that’s what I’m doing now,” he said.

HUD-VASH is one of three programs whereby VA is helping Veterans with a Continuum of Care that supports emergency, contract residential/transitional, or permanent housing. Veterans are required to meet with their case managers at a minimum of once a month. The support is part of VA’s Behavioral Health Service which assists Veterans with their mental health, substance abuse prevention, employment support, and work with VA community partners to end homelessness.

“We are happy to have housing vouchers available for eligible Veterans,” explained Dr. Quinn Bastian, Chief, BHS who added, “and, we’re honored to serve those with wounds that may not be visible but are willing to step forward and allow VA to help them.”

For Harrison and the others enrolled in HUD-VASH, that’s not a problem at all. He’s looking well into the future with hopes of becoming a cyber operations technician with the Department of Justice or large corporation. “I don’t have a huge support network around me, but what I do have is a positive outlook, the love of a woman and our child, and I have Heidi to thank for reminding me of the traits so many Vets must carry with us going forward in life: integrity, loyalty, honor, and respect.”



VA Launches Telehealth Outreach to VFW, American Legion Posts

Here's an [article written by Eric Wicklund](#) which ran in mHealth Intelligence on October 16.



A telehealth clinic in a VFW post in Montana is the first of several planned by the Department of Veterans Affairs as it moves to improve access to care for veterans living in rural areas.

The Department of Veterans Affairs is expanding its telehealth platform to give veterans access to healthcare at local American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars posts. VFW Post 6786 in Eureka, MT became the first in the nation this week to open a connected health clinic as part of the VA's ATLAS (Accessing Telehealth through Local Area Stations) program. The project aims to improve access to care for the nation's 20 million veterans, roughly 5 million of which live in designated rural areas.

"Our goal is to make sure every veteran has access to healthcare," VA Secretary Robert Wilkie [said in a press release](#). "ATLAS eliminates another healthcare hurdle for veterans living in rural areas or with limited Internet access, and it's a great example of how public and private organizations can work together to solve the challenges of healthcare."

The program is a partnership involving the VA, VFW, American Legion and Philips, which is providing the virtual care platform and mHealth devices for the telehealth stations. Clinics will soon be opening at a VFW post in Linesville, PA, a combined VFM/American Legion post in Los Banos, CA and an American Legion post in Springfield, VA.

"Sitting inside state-of-the-art, private, Internet-connected healthcare pods developed and donated by Philips, veterans will benefit from virtual appointments in familiar surroundings conducted by VA medical professionals," VFW National Commander William J. "Doc" Schmitz said in the press release. "This removes geographic and digital barriers and is the latest way today's VFW Posts are innovating to address the needs of our Veterans and their families."

The VA-Philips partnership [was unveiled in late 2018](#) as part of the agency's "Anywhere to Anywhere VA Health Care" initiative [launched a year earlier by Wilkie's predecessor, David Shulkin](#). Along with the Philips deal, the VA also forged partnerships with Walmart to establish telehealth clinics in select locations and T-Mobile to host the VA's Video Connect mHealth app.

While the mHealth app enables veterans to access care from their smartphone or laptop, the Walmart and Philips deals aim to reach veterans who don't normally use mHealth devices, but would go to a locally located clinic. "(It) totally changes the VA's footprint for delivering care," Deborah Scher, executive adviser to the VA's Center for Strategic Partnerships, said last year. "We mapped out where our veterans are in greatest



concentration against VA facilities, and then we put the Walmart map on top of that. Ninety percent of Americans live within 10 miles of a Walmart. Ninety percent of veterans don't live within 10 miles of a VA medical center. This totally changes their ability to access care in a way that works for their lives."



VA officials have estimated that the agency's connected health platform has logged more than 1.3 million video visits serving some 485,000 veterans since 2017. In FY 2019 alone, the platform has seen more than 2.5 million episodes of care.

VA Medical Center Showcases Native Art Display

Recently, the Jesse Brown VA Medical Center highlighted Native American artists in its Chicago facility. The short article below was submitted by Joe Podlasek.



Today marked an amazing day for the partnership of Jessie Brown VAMC and Trickster Gallery in Illinois!



Having the support of Jessie Brown VA Administration and an amazing staff of minority representative Debbie Rafael Shanley, Valerie Creedon, and Colleen Kagan working with Joseph Podlasek CEO of Trickster to highlight the Native Veteran artist right here in our community. Just amazing teamwork that was opened with a talking circle from 12 noon to 1 pm, then 1:30 press conference and ribbon cutting, all done within the VAMC building. This shows amazing steps in working with the Native community to come to life!

Highlighted artists were both Vietnam Army Veterans Robert Wapahi, Dakota (pictured above) and Joe Yazzie, Navajo, who was not able to attend.



Jesse Brown Veteran Affairs Medical Center

820 S Damen Ave • Chicago, IL 60612

www.chicago.va.gov

312-569-8387

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Media Contacts:

Valerie Creedon, 312-446-1238 or Valerie.Creedon@va.gov

November 22, 2019

Jesse Brown VA Medical Center Unveils American Indian Veteran Art Display

Chicago, ILL- The Jesse Brown Veteran Affairs Medical Center (JBVAMC) will be unveiling three pieces of American Indian Artwork by American Indian Veterans. These pieces of art are on loan from the Trickster Art Gallery in Schaumburg, Illinois. The art work was created by Joe Yazzi, a member of the Navajo Tribe, and Robert Wapahi, a member of the Dakota Tribe. Both are Army Veterans, Vietnam Era. The display will be unveiled at 1:30 pm on November 26, 2019 at the main campus, on the 2nd floor, between the Damen and Ogden Building.

The art unveiling was timed to coincide with the November 2019 American Indian Heritage Month. This art display is meant to honor the contributions, achievements, and sacrifices of the American Indians' legacy of service in the military. American Indians are the largest minority group to serve in the military, per population size, however, historically many have not accessed services in the Veterans Health Administration System. JBVAMC hopes that through the growing partnership with the Trickster Art Gallery, better connections can be built with this heroic population of Veterans. JBVAMC and the Trickster Art Gallery are displaying these works to help promote and foster a welcoming and healing environment for Native American Veterans.

WHAT: Jesse Brown unveils American Indian Art Display in honor of American Indian Heritage Month

WHEN: 1:30pm Between the Damen and Ogden Building on the Second Floor

WHERE: Jesse Brown VA, 820 S Damen Ave, Chicago, IL 60612)



Society of American Indian Government Employees (SAIGE) and VA sign MOU

If you would like to read the 6-page document, contact Peter.Vicaire@va.gov or danny.garceau@saige.org



Department of Veterans Affairs

*Memorandum of Understanding Between
Department of Veterans Affairs*

and

Society of American Indian Government Employees

This Memorandum of Understanding is to enable meaningful collaboration between the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Society of American Indian Government Employees (SAIGE). It is the intent of this Partnership to coordinate and facilitate activities and initiatives that are responsive to the needs of VA's mission and the needs and mission of SAIGE and its constituents.

This is in keeping with VA's Diversity and Inclusion efforts to create and maintain a diverse, results-oriented, high-performing workforce; cultivate a flexible and inclusive work environment; facilitate outstanding service to our nation's Veterans; and ensure agency accountability and leadership.



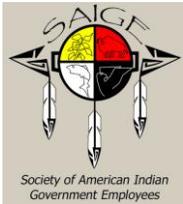
_____, 2019



By Direction of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs

*Daniel R. Sitterly
Assistant Secretary for Human Resources
and Administration/Operations,
Security and Preparedness*

*Fredericka Joseph
Chair, SAIGE*



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Oct. 01, 2019

**VA provides Veterans fleeing domestic violence with
housing and supportive services**
October is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) reminds Veterans nationwide that VA's [Supportive Services for Veteran Families \(SSVF\)](#) and [Grant and Per Diem \(GPD\)](#) provide housing and other services for Veterans experiencing domestic violence and intimate partner violence.

Additionally, in observance of National Domestic Violence Awareness Month, VA's [Intimate Partner Violence Assistance Program](#) will gather with internal and external national partners this October to help promote the department's mission to foster healthy relationships and safety.

"VA recognizes the impact domestic violence has on Veterans and their families and is committed to raising awareness about this serious problem," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "We want to remind Veterans in these tough situations they are not alone, and that VA is here to help them access safe, stable housing and supportive services."

Veterans losing their housing because they are fleeing domestic violence are eligible for SSVF rapid rehousing, which is an intervention designed to help homeless Veterans and their families quickly access permanent housing. The GPD program provides housing and supportive services to help homeless Veterans achieve residential stability, increase their skill levels and incomes and achieve greater self-determination.

In 2017, [Public Law 114-315](#) expanded eligibility for participation in the SSVF and GPD programs by broadening the definition of homeless to include any individual or family fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking — or other situations making it dangerous to remain in the home — which include situations that jeopardize the health and safety of children. Eligible Veterans must have no other residence and lack both the resources and support networks to obtain other permanent housing.

Click [SSVF](#) or [GPD](#) to learn more about VA's domestic violence assistance programs.

###



Fact Sheet



Empowering Veteran Entrepreneurship

Boots to Business

Offered by the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) as a training track within the U.S. Department of Defense's Transition Assistance Program (TAP), this course is open to transitioning service members (including National Guard and Reserve) and their spouses on military installations worldwide.



Contact the transition office on your military installation to register for a Boots to Business course.

Beginning Your Journey

"Introduction to Entrepreneurship" Course

What is it? The "Introduction to Entrepreneurship" course is the foundational piece of Boots to Business (B2B). This two-day, in-person course provides participants with an introductory understanding of business ownership.

What will I learn? The course provides an overview of entrepreneurship and applicable business ownership fundamentals. Participants are introduced to the skills, knowledge, and resources they need to launch a business:



Military experience is a
stronger predictor of entrepreneurship
than graduate education*

*Source: <https://permanent.access.gpo.gov/web sites/www.sba.gov/sba/research/rs313.pdf>

Boots to Business: Reboot

No access to a military installation? Offered by the SBA and its resource partners, Boots to Business Reboot brings the Boots to Business course off installations and into communities, extending access to veterans of all eras, National Guard and Reserve members, and military spouses.



- 1 Visit sbavets.force.com to view a list of upcoming Boots to Business Reboot courses in your area.
- 2 Create an account to join the B2B online community.
- 3 Request to attend your desired course date using your online B2B account.

Continuing Your Journey

Optional Courses + Follow-on Support

After completing the "Introduction to Entrepreneurship" course, participants can elect to further their study through online courses such as B2B: Market Research, B2B Business Fundamentals, Special Topic Tracks, or B2B: Revenue Readiness.

Boots to Business and Boots to Business Reboot participants are also encouraged to take advantage of the many resources and services offered by the SBA and its partner network, including Veterans Business Outreach Centers, SCORE, Small Business Development Centers, and Women's Business Centers.



All SBA services are extended to the public on a nondiscriminatory basis.

Contact Us

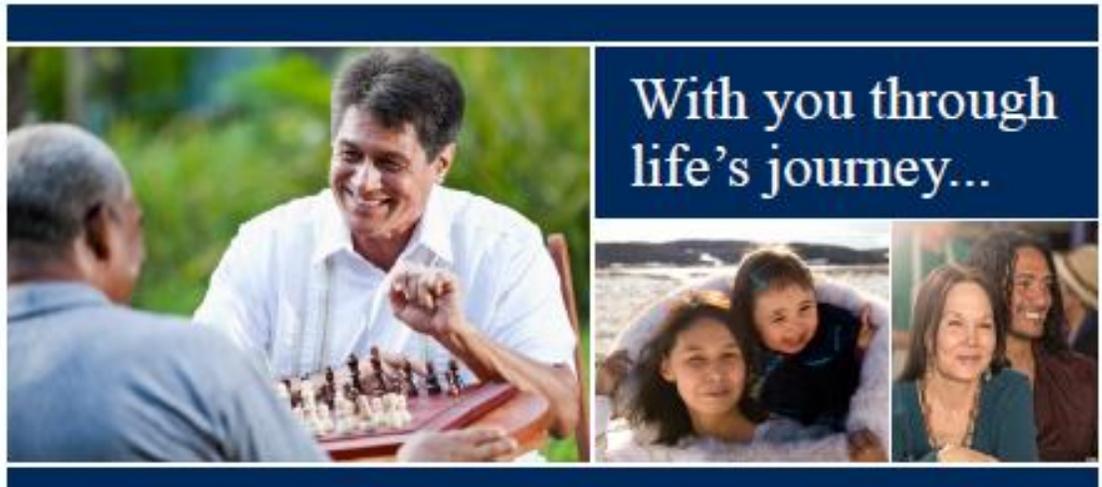
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Tribal Social Security Fairness Act 2018

What is it

The Tribal Social Security Fairness Act of 2018 was signed into law on September 20, 2018. This new law allows federally recognized Indian tribes to extend Social Security coverage to tribal council positions voluntarily through an agreement with the Commissioner of Social Security under Section 218A of the Social Security Act.

Under this new legislation, if a tribe chooses to enter into an agreement for coverage, then all tribal council positions are covered. Coverage will apply to any current and future tribal council members, and cannot be terminated once granted.

Interested Tribes will need to complete the Tribal Council Member Coverage Agreement to request coverage. The tribes will communicate directly with SSA regional specialists to execute the agreements.

Coverage will be effective the month after the month the agreement is signed, unless the tribe requests a later effective date.

Retroactivity

Tribes may request retroactive coverage for periods for which they have already paid Federal Insurance Contributions Act (FICA) taxes and not received a refund. Retroactivity can go back as far as needed without limit as long as FICA taxes were paid.

If you did not pay FICA during the retroactive period, you will not be charged. You cannot pay into the retroactive period.

For More Information

ssa.gov/siga/specialists.htm
ssa.gov/people/aian

Email us at:
ssa.tribal.communications@ssa.gov

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Securing today
and tomorrow

Social Security Administration
Publication No. 05-10601 | August 2019
Tribal Social Security Fairness Act of 2018
Produced and printed at U.S. taxpayer expense

OTGR Eastern Region

(AL; CT; FL; LA; MA; ME; MI; NC; NY; RI; SC;)



**Wabanaki Cultural Awareness:
*Maine Native American History***
Thursday, December 5th 1:00p.m.—3:00p.m.
VA Maine Healthcare System (Togus)
Building 210—Togus Theater

Program Highlights Include:

Presentation of Maine Native American History
by Donald Soctomah

Passamaquoddy Tribe and Tribal Historic Preservation Officer

Screening of, “Underground Cities-The Secret Cities of World War I”
a film recounting the early part of WWI and the Yankee Division of
New England

Question/Answer session after the film

Brought to you by:

**Maine Bureau of Veterans’ Services &
VA Maine Healthcare System**



For more information, contact: Sarah Sherman

(207) 430-5816

Sarah.Sherman@maine.gov

Maine Bureau of Veterans’ Services





Amenities Included

- Garbage pickup
- U.S. Postal mail box on premises
- Lawns mowed and manicured
- Snow removal
- Parking spot for tenant
- Guest parking only in designated area
- Annual safety inspection
- Maintenance staff available



Akwesasne Housing Authority

378 State Rte 37, Suite A
Hogansburg, NY 13655
Tel: 518-358-9020
Fax: 518-358-2348

**Sunrise Acres
Supportive Housing
(SASH)**

Veterans Supportive Housing

Dedicated to providing safe and affordable housing for our homeless Native American Veterans of Akwesasne

This supportive housing is not intended for assisted living or nursing home candidates.

6 Unit Expansion for 2019



Subject to HOME funding requirements

**Application/Intake
Process**

- Referral
- Interview and Assessment
- AHA Review of Referral
- AHA Housing Application
- Verification
- Waitlist Placement
- Pre-Selection
- STEP Review
- Individual Service Plan (ISP)
- Move in

Documents Required:

- Proof of Tribal Enrollment
- Verification of Social Security Number
- Notarized Release of Information
- Current Annual Income
- Veterans documentation
- Homeless documentation

**Sunrise Acres
Supportive Housing
Veterans Supportive Housing**

The Veterans Supportive Housing will include a six (6) unit building serving homeless Native Americans with a preference for Veterans of the US Armed Services.

Four (4) one-bedroom apartments will provide permanent and stable housing for homeless Native American Veterans and two (2) two-bedrooms will be targeted to Veterans who would benefit from supportive housing. The units include a washer and dryer, a galley kitchen with stove and refrigerator in an open concept floor plan.

- Handicap Accessible Building & Sidewalks
- Natural Landscaping Features
- Wooded/Natural Setting
- Outdoor Seating and Recreational Areas
- Space for service providers/resource
- Communal space for tenant
- Energy Star Appliances

Pavilion

A covered pavilion is available for resident use. There are two restroom facilities, picnic tables with bench seating for activities or events.

Residents must contact Administration Office to reserve and to request additional seating. Information will be provided regarding Pavilion use.



Akwesasne Housing Authority

378 State Route 37, Suite A
Hogansburg, New York
13655

Tel: 518-358-9020
Fax: 518-358-2348



Free Legal Assistance for Veterans

How the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG) Can Help:

The NYLAG Veterans Practice provides free legal services to New York City veterans who cannot afford to hire a private attorney. We are committed to helping our clients secure the compensation and benefits they earned through their dedicated service to our country. Through our holistic care model, we help veterans and households with veterans access the legal services they need to achieve economic security. Additionally, we coordinate with local veteran organizations to facilitate appropriate referrals for other non-legal services.

Our Services

- **Veterans Benefits:** Service Connected Disability Compensation, Non-Service Connected Pension, Survivor Benefits, Total Disability Individual Unemployability (TDIU), Discharge Upgrades
- **Housing:** Eviction Prevention, Landlord Disputes, Unsafe or Hazardous Housing Conditions
- **Public Benefits:** Medicaid, Medicare, Social Security Disability (SSDI), Supplemental Security Insurance (SSI), SNAP (Food Stamps)
- **Advance Planning:** Last Wills and Testaments, Medical Advance Directives, Powers of Attorney
- **Consumer Protection:** Debt Matters, Bankruptcy, Mortgage and Foreclosure Issues
- **Financial Counseling:** Managing Debt or Dealing with Debt Collection, Improving Credit Scores, Student Loan Debt, Identity Theft, Financial Budgeting

For a consultation, please call the Veterans Practice intake line at

(212) 946-0343 or email us at vethelp@nylag.org

**Our ability to provide representation is based on different factors, depending on the legal issue.*



NYLAG
NEW YORK LEGAL ASSISTANCE GROUP

HOMELESS VETERANS' REINTEGRATION PROGRAM



AN EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM FOR
VETERANS' WHO ARE HOMELESS OR
AT RISK OF BEING HOMELESS AND
WANTING TO SEEK MEANINGFUL
EMPLOYMENT.

SERVICES PROVIDED:

- Case management
- Referral for Housing stability
- Job placement
- Job Search assistance
- Job skills training
- Resume building and interview preparation
- Financial assistance for job placement items

Contact Info:

Phone: 601-545-3668

Fax: 601-545-2926

4507 U.S HWY 49 S

Hattiesburg, MS 39401

OTGR Southern Plains Region

(KS; OK; TX)

CHEYENNE AND ARAPAHO TRIBES



Join Us for the

Office of Veterans Affairs
CHRISTMAS
BRUNCH

Thursday December 12, 2019
10:00 AM – 12:00 PM

Native American Church Building
Concho, OK



The seal is circular with a red border. Inside, there is a red handprint with five fingers. Above the handprint, the text 'TSISISISTAS-HINONO'EI' is written in a semi-circle. Below the handprint, the text 'WARRIOR' is written in a semi-circle. On the left and right sides of the handprint, there are small black and white symbols.

OKC CHOCTAW/INTER-TRIBAL VETERANS ASSOCIATION POST 319 & CVA MONTHLY MEETING

WHEN: 1ST Saturday of each month

WHERE: Choctaw Alliance Center
5320 S Young's Blvd, OKC OK 73119

TIME: 1000 am – 1200 pm

WHO: All Native Veterans in the surrounding OKC
area

OUR MISSION: To foster camaraderie among native
veterans who served honorably. To serve our veterans
and our communities in any which way we can. To
advocate for all native veterans.

VISION: Ensure that native veterans are respected for
their service, always receive their earned entitlements,
and are recognized for the sacrifices they and their loved
ones have made on behalf of this great country.

POC: POST COMMANDER-Harold Marris

PHONE: 405-326-2621 or 405-456-4845

EMAIL: chatachafa@live.com

Native American Combat Veterans Group

Starts:

On-Going Open Group

Meets:

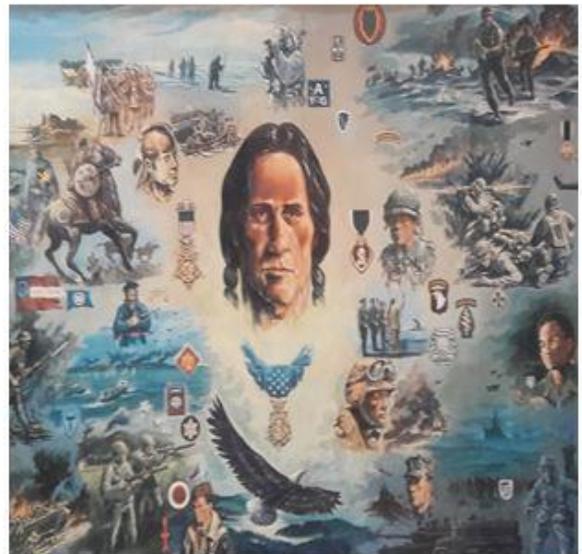
1st and 3rd Tuesdays

Location:

Norman First American
United Methodist Church
1950 Beaumont Drive,
Norman, Oklahoma, 73071

Time:

1:00 p.m.



Purpose:

This group provides the opportunity for Native American Combat Veterans to get together to transform the way PTSD impacts their life.

Eligibility:

Combat Veteran with DD214. Call for Billy Grimes at (405) 456-5184.

Contact:

Call for Billy Grimes at (405) 456-5184.

This is your time! It is an HONOR to serve you.

OTGR Southwest Region

(AZ; CO; NM; UT)



**75th
Anniversary
Iwo Jima
Flag Raising**

**Military Parade and
Flyover to begin at 8:30 AM.
Ceremonies to follow at the
Mathew B. Juan, Ira H. Hayes
Veterans Memorial Park in
Sacaton, AZ.**
All Public and Veterans Groups are welcome

**Feb.22
2020**

Luncheon hosted by American Legion Auxiliary Unit No. 84 with St. Peter Church and School.
Event sponsored by American Legion Ira H. Hayes Post No. 84 and Auxiliary Unit No. 84
Mailing Address: P.O. Box 186 Sacaton, Az. 85147 / Phone: 520-562-8484 / Fax: 520-562-3297
Email Address: ihpost84@gilanet.net / Website: irahayespost84.org

ATTENTION!!!

AZ Native American Veterans Settlement Fund

2019 is the last year to apply for the AZ Native American Tax Settlement Fund (NASF). The NASF was established on July 1, 2016 to refund Arizona income tax erroneously withheld from Native Americans who served in the military while claiming tribal land as their domicile.

To submit a claim, you must have served on active duty military between 1977 to 2005. This includes all living and deceased AZ Native American Veterans.

Last day to apply is December 31, 2019. So act now to submit your application form. The form can be obtained from the AZ Department of Veterans' Services website: www.dvs.az.gov or contact the Hopi Veterans Services at (928) 734-3461 to obtain the application.

APPLY TODAY!

APPLY FOR VA BENEFIT CLAIMS WEB CAMERA SESSION

Veterans and Widows of Veterans can now apply for VA disability compensation or pension claims at our office.

Using web camera technology, an Arizona Department of Veterans' Services Benefits Officer will speak directly with you to apply for VA claims.

Please bring a copy of your military discharge document (DD Form 214); an ID card; social security card; marriage and/or divorce documents; birth and/or death certificates; and any financial award letters.

Who: Veterans and Widows of Veterans

How: Call (928) 734-3461 or 734-3462 to schedule an appointment.

Where: Hopi Veterans Services office
Tribal Complex DATS Building, First Floor
Kykotsmovi, AZ.

Why: To qualify for the VA benefits you earned!



Thank you for your service.

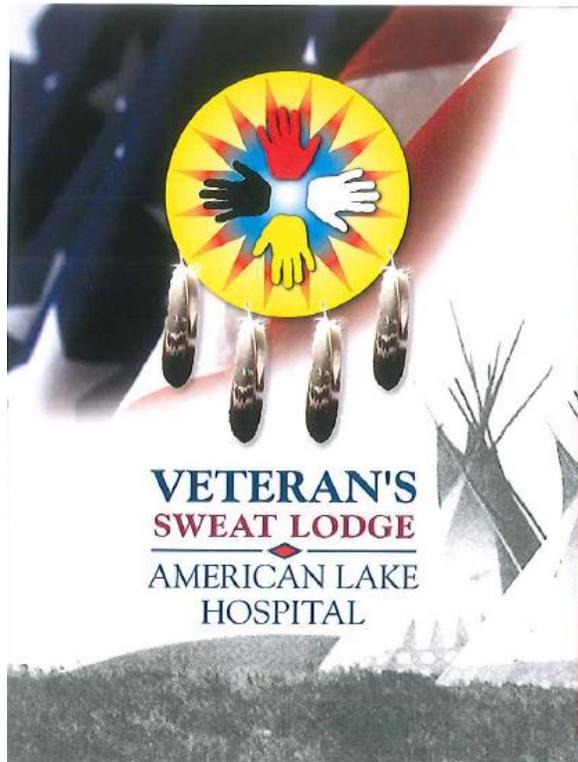
Now let us serve you.



APPLY FOR YOUR VA BENEFITS TODAY!

OTGR Western Region

(AK; CA; ID; NV; OR; WA)



**VETERAN'S
SWEAT LODGE**
AMERICAN LAKE
HOSPITAL

Following Footprints of the Ancestors

VA Sweat Lodge Schedule...

Day-time lodge - First Tuesday of every month
Gate opens at 8:00am - closes at 5:30pm
Ceremony starts at 12:00pm

Night-time lodge - Third Tuesday of every month
Gate opens at 12:00pm - closes at 10:00pm
Ceremony starts at 5:00pm

*Located on the American Lake Hospital campus
1/4 mile past main entrance (left side) look for signage.*

VA Talking Circle Schedule...

Night-time - Second & Fourth Wednesday of every month
Starting time at 6:00pm end at 10:00pm
Located at the VA Chapel - bldg #111

**For Information
about Sweatlodge
and Talking Circle
go to
vasweatlodge.org**

Mike L>>>—>
Ceremonial Elder (Blackfeet)
253-312-5431
mch3645@aol.com

Marty Martinez
Native Council / Point of Contact
360-943-5087
greenbeanie1@hotmail.com