

Medical Center joins State, Regional, and National VA Support for Veterans Training Summit in Lewiston, Idaho

By Bret Bowers, Public Affairs Officer
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Following prayer, drum and song, American Indian Veterans posted the colors to open the VA Office of Tribal Government Relations (OTGR) Veterans Training Summit in Lewiston, ID last week. The two day event brought VA leaders, subject matter experts and resources to provide Veterans with the very latest information available about benefits, programs, and services available to them.

The team from Spokane's Mann-Grandstaff VA Medical Center was led by **Linda Reynolds**, Medical Center Director. She was joined by **Dr. John Osborn, Kurt Rossbach, Tammie Maple, Bennett Traylor, Esther Westlake and Bret Bowers. Bob Sonderman Mike Lehman and Paul Hacker** delivered the Mobile Clinic for exams. The (Spokane) Vet Center sent **Josh Anderson** and **Joe Dumlae**. Dozens of Veterans and key stakeholders were greeted by vendors and trade-table booths. Walla Walla VA's leadership, including Director **Bryan Westfield** was there, as were **Linda Wondra** and **David Beebe** from the Jonathan Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center (Walla Walla)

"These Veteran Training Summits, sponsored by VA's Office of Tribal Government Relations, are great examples of how a federal agency can bring together members and leaders of Native American tribes to offer information and guidance on how to navigate the many programs and benefits available to Veterans," explained **Larry Carroll**, Director of VA's Northwest Health Network (VISN 20).

"The VA has made significant progress in recognizing, respecting and accommodating Native American cultural sensitivities into its programs and services. Summits like the one in Lewiston, ID provide an excellent forum for strengthening relationships between the VA and Native American tribes," he continued.

In Veteran circles, nobody respects their elders more than the distinctive culture of Native Americans. They openly pray. Their songs and the pounding beat of the warrior drum elicit deep emotions for not just those who've passed on, but also those who've made it back after serving their country and fighting in combat as a member of the U.S. Armed Forces. Native America Indians openly thank each and every Veteran, anytime they thank their own.

The two-day summit provided some traditional, honorary customs, including recognizing their Tribal Elders, including World War-II Veterans and other special guests pleased to receive the generous offering of a hand-made quilt.



Above: Linda Reynolds, Medical Center Director comments among the Distinguished Panel discussion during the OTGR Veterans Training Summit in Lewiston, Idaho April 9-10, 2014



At Center, Larry Carroll, Director VISN-20 comments during panel discussion at Veterans Training Summit. At left: Bryan Westfield, Director – Walla Walla VA and at right, Kathryn Malin, Director VBA Regional Office in Boise, Idaho.



L-R: Terry Bentley, VA-OTGR presents Korean War Veteran, Clifford Allen (Nez Perce Tribe) with a hand-made quilt.

The conference provided in-depth presentation and discussion about several Veteran-centric programs, including Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Support; news and updates from the State of Idaho Division of Veteran Services, Veterans Treatment Courts and Veterans Justice Outreach diversionary programs (where the current need throughout the region – is for volunteer Veteran Peer Mentors); changes to Veterans Beneficiary Travel; claims and

benefits; suicide prevention; and the Native American Indian Veterans Advisory Council's annual Memorial and Honoring ceremony held at the Mann-Grandstaff VA Medical Center, which draws hundreds of Veterans and spectators each September during the one-day event here.

Equally important, are the health care services available to Native American Veterans through local clinics where formalized agreements are providing all Veterans on and off reservation with health care and/or reimbursement through VA and Indian Health Services (IHS). "A lot of Tribal Veterans prefer staying close to home for their Health care, explained Steven Moffit, a Tribal Veteran Representative and OEF/OIF/OND Veteran who served in the U.S. Army. "We're trying to make it convenient by giving them options for health care with the providers they already know."

Nationally, there are 46 current Tribal Health Programs (THP's) governing 81 Indian Health Services contracts with the VA. In all, they currently serve 2300 of the 48,000 eligible Native American or Alaskan Indian Veterans. To date, the VA has reimbursed IHS nearly \$6,000,000 in direct care to Veterans. The two closest IHS clinics to the Mann-Grandstaff VA Medical Center are the Benewah Medical & Wellness Center (Coeur d'Alene Tribe) in Plummer, Idaho; and "The People's Clinic" (Nez Perce Tribe) in Lapwai, Idaho near Lewiston.

One of the presentations offered at the summit, was a close-up look at VA Home Loans and the distinction between the Native American Direct Loan (NADL) and the traditional VA Home Loan for eligible Veterans.

Ivonne Perez, a VA Loan Specialist gave a presentation on the clear advantages of a guaranteed VA Home Loan compared to a commercial loan. For example, Veterans who have a 10% disability rating do not have to pay any "loan handling" fees which can be in the hundreds of dollars. Ms. Perez showed another benefit for Native American Veterans. Closing costs on a NADL loan are 1.91% of the loan amount, compared to 5.34% for a typical VA home loan.

"That's a real savings," she explained. During the market decline in the late 2000's, where many American's faced foreclosure or lost their home, the VA was there to help when many home loans became "at risk" throughout the country.



Above: Bennett "Tray" Traylor explains Veteran eligibility and the recent switch to Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT) for travel reimbursement to Veteran Julian Matthews, Nez Perce Tribe and Terry Bentley, VA OTGR at the conference.



Above left: Tammie Maple, Minority Veteran Program Manager, provided an overview of the American Indian Veterans Advisory Council at work at the Mann-Grandstaff VAMC. Stephen Moffit, a US Army Veteran and Coeur d'Alene Tribal Veteran Representative also provided helpful information



Above Left: Ivonne Perez, a VA Home Loan specialist explains the advantages and benefits of a VA Home Loan to Veteran Stephanie Rosebrook.

“If the Veteran’s goal is to stay in their house, we will find ways to make it happen,” she smiled. Any Veteran with questions about their VA Home Loan can call the VA’s regional loan service center in Denver, CO at (888) 349-7541.

In addition to the presentations at the summit, Veterans were presented with multiple VA programs, services, and vendors. Among them, were the Spokane Vet Center staff, who provided information and resources related to the counseling services offered on-site, and during their on-going “Boots on the Ground” outreach campaign where Vet Center staff are traveling to 34 counties to meet with Veterans and service organizations in rural areas. One additional topic presented and open each August to Veterans and 60 VA Staff within VISN 20, is the therapeutic and cleansing results found through the Yakima Tribe’s “Camp Chapparel” week-long camp in rural S.W. Washington State.

All of the topics presented and discussed at the Veterans Training Summit were provided by the VA Office of Tribal Government Relations and coordinators Peter Vicaire and Terry Bentley. Ms. Bentley, a Native American herself, hosts OTGR Conferences throughout the Western U.S. and hosted a OTGR Western Region summit in Spokane in 2012.



Above: Kurt Rossbach, Suicide Prevention Coordinator met with Veterans and provided information about Question, Persuade, & Respond (QPR) method to assist people when in a mental health crisis.



Above L-R: Dave Beebe, Team Leader of the Walla Walla Vet Center and Josh Anderson, Vet Center, a Readjustment Counseling Specialist with Spokane’s Vet Center attended the 2014 Veterans Training Summit.



Above and Left: Posting of the Colors during opening ceremonies of the 2014 VA Office of Tribal Government’s Veterans Training Summit at the Clearwater Casino in Lewiston, Idaho – hosted by OTGR’s Terry Bentley and Peter Vicaire.



Above L-R: Paul Hacker, Mike Lehman, and Bob Sonderman provided clinical services at the Veterans Training Summit through the VAMC Mobile Clinic bus.