



Oregon

Kate Brown, Governor

Department of Veterans' Affairs

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December 2, 2016

TO: Karen Quigley, Director of Legislative Commission on Indian Services
FROM: Cameron Smith, Director of Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs
RE: 2016 Government-to-Government Report

The Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs (ODVA) is pleased to submit this report to Governor Kate Brown and the Legislative Commission on Indian Services in accordance with ORS 182.162-182.168 (SB 770).

2016 Government-to-Government Efforts and Goals

ODVA has an established and valuable collaboration with the nine federally recognized Native American Tribes across Oregon in the delivery of state and federal services for our veterans. In 2016, ODVA continued this work to strengthen relations between tribal governments and key federal, state, county and other partner organizations to better serve Native American veterans across Oregon.

ODVA's recent efforts across the veteran services system have focused on three important outcome areas for Oregon's Native American veterans:

- Target advocacy and access to veteran services
- Increase access to health care and social services
- Promote and participate in good Government-to-Government relationships to help shape the priorities of veteran services available to tribal veterans

Tribal Veteran Landscape

The Oregon Native American communities have a long and proud history of honoring and supporting all veterans. American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) veterans have long played a vital role in the United States military and have one of the highest records of military service per capita of any ethnic group.

According to a 2015 Federal VA report, *American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans: 2013 American Community Survey*, it is estimated that 2,987 American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) veterans reside in Oregon, representing 2.1 percent of Oregon's total veteran population. More than 15 percent of Oregon AIAN veterans are women (400) and nationally, the proportion of female AIAN veterans is higher than that of female veterans of other races. AIAN veterans also live in the western region of the United States more than any other region.

Nationally, the percentage of AIAN veterans with no health insurance is more than double that of all other ethnic groups of veterans. They also have a higher percentage of disability with about 26 percent having a service-connected disability rating as of 2013, compared with 18.2 percent of veterans of all other races.

AIAN veterans have lower personal incomes than other veterans; however, AIAN veterans have higher incomes than AIAN non-veterans (\$26,872 vs. \$12,551, respectively) and are as likely to have a bachelors' degree as veterans of other ethnicities. AIAN veterans' unemployment rate is not statistically different from any other veteran.

Serving Oregon Veterans Since 1945

Advocacy and Access to Veteran Services

Through our Statewide Veteran Services, ODVA is a center of gravity for veterans seeking to access their veteran benefits. Our focus is on benefits counseling, claims and appellate representation, and certification and training of veteran service officers. We continue to build a strong advocacy system for all veterans, and recognize that there continue to be specific groups of underserved veteran populations including tribal veterans.

Continuing to build on the innovative collaboration between the Federal VA, ODVA and tribal and community partners that began in 2014, ODVA hosted a third Tribal Veteran Representative (TVR) training event in May 2016, in partnership with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR).

TVR's are trained tribal members who act as liaisons between veterans and the federal VA. They specialize in access to benefits, healthcare and social services and work specifically with tribal veterans to ensure their health, education and economic opportunity.

At the conference, ODVA provided training on benefits available to veterans, their families and survivors, and the development and submission of claims for those earned benefits. Several other government partners participated, offering information and updates on a variety of subjects, such as substance abuse and mental health services, Social Security benefits, education benefits, tribal governments procurement processes, Vet Centers, and VA Regional Office updates.

The conference had participants from four states and four Oregon tribes, including leadership from Oklahoma, Arizona and Nevada state veterans affairs departments. Inter-governmental networking and idea sharing is continuing, even months after the event concluded. We have had excellent feedback from all participants on the success of the inter-governmental effort.

ODVA looks forward to continued opportunities to include TVRs in our regular training events and help them be the best advocates for tribal veterans and all Oregon veterans. We will also continue our support for tribal governments to have their own direct link back to the federal VA where desired.

Access to Healthcare and Social Services

ODVA has also been supportive of efforts to improve tribal veterans access to federal VA healthcare benefits. Through the VA's Office of Tribal Government Relations, Indian Health Service (IHS) and Tribal Health Partners (THP), reimbursement agreements to further cover tribal veterans' health needs have been implemented in Oregon. The purpose of this agreement is to reimburse non-federal VA facilities for direct care services provided to eligible Native American veterans. By the end of 2015, the federal VA had disbursed a national cumulative total of \$33 million through the reimbursement program. As a result of the reimbursement agreement, 5,961 AIAN veterans nationally have received healthcare services in community locations other than a federal VA medical facility.

ODVA has also been supportive of efforts to improve housing opportunities for tribal veterans. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and federal VA have an established program (HUD-VASH) that provides vouchers and case management services to veterans struggling with homelessness on tribal lands. HUD-VASH isn't a new program, but this specific focus on tribal veterans is more recent.

The program offers permanent home and supportive services to Native American veterans who are experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness. Since the program was piloted in 2015, one obstacle that has been identified is the lack of available housing. There are now efforts by tribal

governments to build affordable housing that will meet the demand and leverage the program offered by the federal VA.

Government-to-Government Relations and Shaping Priorities

ODVA was invited by the federal VA Intergovernmental Affairs Office and the National Congress for American Indians (NCAI) to participate in the 2016 conference in Spokane, Washington. This event drew tribal leadership from across the nation and was focused on setting priorities for better serving tribal veterans, with a special focus on those located in rural communities.

The priorities, which will inform an Indian country policy agenda for veterans, the federal VA, members of Congress and other veteran serving partners, include:

- Housing
- Healthcare
- Mental Health services
- Services for families
- Access to benefits

ODVA is also continuing work with the federal VA's Office of General Counsel, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR), and others within Oregon to support proposed rule changes allowing tribal governments to have their own Power of Attorney in representing claims for veterans before the federal VA. ODVA is acting as a subject matter expert in offering input to the proposals, as well as training and support to our tribal partners.

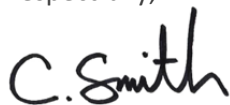
ODVA was invited by CTUIR leadership for a formal tribal consultation to discuss these proposed rule changes and the options available to the tribe to further increase veteran services available to tribal veterans.

While ODVA is proud of our efforts to serve and honor tribal veterans, we recognize no single agency or organization can wholly address the diverse needs across native lands.

Throughout the nine tribes, ODVA continues to build strong partnerships to assist tribal veterans and their families in improving the quality of their lives for their health, education and economic opportunity by ensuring access to the VA health care system and all state and federal veteran benefits.

We look forward to continued collaboration across governments, agencies and other essential partners who serve all veterans in the delivery of state and federal veteran services and benefits.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "C. Smith". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Cameron Smith
Director