



Oregon

Kate Brown, Governor

Department of Veterans' Affairs

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December 4, 2015

TO: Karen Quigley, Director of Legislative Commission on Indian Services
FROM: Cameron Smith, Director of Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs
RE: 2015 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).

2015 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 2015, ODVA continued this work to strengthen and build closer relations between the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), tribal governments and other key federal, state, private and non-profit partners to better serve Native American veterans across Oregon.

Recent efforts across the veteran services system have focused on three important outcomes: focused advocacy and veteran service training for Tribal Veteran Representatives (TVRs), increased access to health care, and improved housing opportunities for at risk tribal veterans to prevent or address homelessness.

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. In fact, AIAN veterans have served at the highest rate in the Post 9/11 era than any other group of veterans. In the Vietnam era, they also volunteered for military service at a higher rate than other groups of veterans.

According to the Census Bureau's American Community Survey 2013 Microdata, 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 AIAN veterans also live in the western region of the United States than any other region.

More than 13 percent of Oregon AIAN veterans are women and nationally, the proportion of female AIAN veterans is higher than that of female veterans of other races (11 percent vs. 8 percent, respectively).

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.

Advocacy, Benefit Access and Veteran Service Training for Tribal Veteran Representatives

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, but recognize that there continue to be specific groups of underserved veteran populations including tribal veterans.

As such, ODVA partnered with the Federal VA Office of Tribal Government Relations to host a Tribal Veteran Representative (TVR) training event in September 2015, in Salem. 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 entities participated, offering information and updates on a variety of subjects, such as substance abuse and mental health services, Social Security benefits, education benefits, native procurement processes, Vet Centers, and VA Regional Office updates.

Thirty-three participants came from eight states, covering services in healthcare, social work, veteran advocacy, among others, from a wide variety of tribes. Inter-governmental networking and idea sharing is continuing, even months after the event concluded. Other states have contacted ODVA to ask how the event was planned and coordinated, because word has spread of the success of the inter-governmental effort.

ODVA is also currently working with the federal VA's Office of General Counsel, the Umatilla Nation, and other tribes 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.

In November 2015, a Veteran's Training Summit was held on the Warm Springs reservation. Approximately eight TVRs and veteran advocates from Oregon participated in the event. Training covered a wide range of topics including VA benefits, VA social services access on the reservations, and training on Native American Direct Loans (NADL). The NADL is an underused VA benefit that assists veterans with housing needs within Native American lands.

ODVA looks forward to continued opportunities to include TVRs in our regular training events and help make them 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

ODVA has also been supportive of efforts to improve tribal veterans access to their earned 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 facilities for direct care services provided to eligible Native American veterans. By the end of FY 2014, the federal VA had disbursed a cumulative total of \$13.1 million through the reimbursement program of which \$7.6 million was for care at IHS facilities and \$5.5 million was for care at THPs. As a result of the reimbursement agreement, 4,500 AIAN veterans received healthcare services in community locations other than a federal VA medical facility.

Additionally, VA and IHS were the first federal agencies to receive accreditation by DirectTrust, which has enabled the two agencies to use a health data exchange platform that allows direct and secure communication with thousands of hospitals, medical practices and healthcare professionals.

Housing

ODVA has also been supportive of efforts to improve housing opportunities for tribal veterans, The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development – Veterans Affairs Supported Housing (HUD-VASH) is piloting a voucher program 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 new.

The program offers permanent home and supportive services to Native American veterans who are experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness. The Tribal HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (Tribal HUD-VASH) Program will combine \$4 million in rental assistance from HUD with case management and clinical services provided by federal VA to serve Native American veterans.

Government-to-Government Relations and Support

While ODVA is proud of our efforts to serve and honor tribal veterans, we also 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 – economically, socially and health-wise – 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, slightly slanted style.

Cameron Smith
Director