

**STATEMENT OF
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE**

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Introduction

Good afternoon, Chairman Akaka and members of the committee, I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) programs and services for Native Veterans.

On November 5, 2009, President Obama signed a Presidential Memorandum directing all U.S. Government agencies to develop detailed plans to fully implement the Executive Order 13175, "Consultation and Coordination With Indian Tribal Governments." The President described tribal consultation as "a critical ingredient of a sound and productive Federal-Tribal relationship."

In signing the Presidential Memorandum, the President set a standard of action to which he expects his Administration to be held, and we are being challenged to meet that standard. As such, VA created the Office of Tribal Government Relations (OTGR) and I was hired as the Director of the Office last year. In August 2011, VA hired four Tribal Government Relations Specialists to manage a portfolio of relationships with tribal governments within specific regions across the country. These specialists serve as a resource to tribal governments seeking to engage in productive relationships with VA.

Guided by the VA's Tribal Consultation Policy, signed by Secretary Shinseki in February 2011, OTGR has been charged to develop partnerships with American Indian and Alaska Native Tribal governments to enhance access to services and benefits for Native Veterans. VA must build and maintain lasting bonds with Tribal leaders and Native American Veterans. Toward this end, meaningful consultation is absolutely vital if we are to effectively address the unique needs of Native American Veterans.

Trust is the single most important aspect in our relationship with the Tribes and Native American Veterans. VA is working to earn the trust of Tribal leaders and Native American Veterans through consistent outreach and an open door policy. As an enrolled member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma with over 15 years experience in Indian Affairs, I know it will take time, but I believe it is a goal VA will achieve. Serving both Indian Country and our Nation's heroes is both a professional and deeply personal calling.

Outreach and Consultation

Within VA, OTGR serves as an entry point for American Indian and Alaskan Native Tribal Government concerns. With an estimated 383,000 Native American Veterans and 566 federally-recognized tribal governments, there is much work to be done. VA is embarking on a robust outreach and consultation effort that consists of three pillars: listening, aiding, and advocating.

While listening includes receiving communications from Tribal leaders through e-mail, phone, and social media tools, we believe the best way to create lasting bonds of trust is to meet with Tribal leaders and Native American Veterans in their communities. VA held listening sessions in Bethel, Alaska; Billings, Montana; Bismarck, North Dakota; and Albuquerque, New Mexico. OTGR has participated in conferences in Arizona, Montana, Idaho, Texas, Wisconsin, Oklahoma, and Washington. During April 2012, OTGR held four regional meetings throughout Indian Country with Tribes in an effort to facilitate discussions about increasing access to healthcare and benefits through informative presentations and interactive discussions about VA's efforts to reach Veterans in Indian Country. VA has also conducted site visits to key locations that deliver services to Native American Veterans, including the Consolidated Mail Outpatient Pharmacy in Leavenworth, Kansas, and Tribal courts in Navajo Nation, Hopi and Laguna Pueblo Tribes, and Tribal communities in South Dakota. OTGR is very grateful for the vast cooperation each of these Tribes has provided. Without this support, it would be difficult for OTGR to understand the challenges Native American Veterans are facing. Maintaining an aggressive outreach schedule to increase the number of American Indian and Alaska Native Tribal governments with which we are building relationships remains paramount.

VA also provides training and assistance to Native American Veterans. For example, VA provided technical assistance to Native American Veterans seeking home loans during the recent meeting held in April. Our outreach provides a unique opportunity to deliver technical information to Native American Veterans. OTGR has sponsored outreach booths at the National Congress of American Indians annual convention, Gathering of Nations Pow-Wow, and Indian Health Service Self-Governance Conference, and will host a booth at the upcoming National Indian Health Board annual consumer conference. Officials can leverage these opportunities to increase Native American Veteran enrollment in VA's health care system, educate Veterans about benefits for which they may be eligible, and connect them with online resources such as eBenefits and My HealthVet. Every encounter with Tribal leaders and Veterans in Indian Country is an opportunity to make a difference in a Veteran's life.

OTGR is also advocating for Tribal governments. The Secretary of VA is committed to conducting meaningful consultation with Tribes; this means transforming words into action. VA conducted its first Tribal consultation in April 2012 in Washington, DC. Three more Tribal consultation sessions are scheduled in fiscal year (FY) 2012 for Alaska, Nebraska and Colorado. Tribal leaders will have an opportunity to voice their concerns on issues that affect the well being of Veterans and their families. With a direct link to the Tribes through OTGR, we will be able to address their concerns before

new policies and procedures are implemented. OTGR is already serving as a vital intergovernmental link for VA's health, benefits, and memorial programs.

Sustainable Economic Opportunities

The VA mission to “care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan” extends to all Veterans, but VA officials understand that Veterans in Indian Country face unique challenges. My office works closely with the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to address systemic economic issues within Tribal communities. VA can and will do more to increase access to and utilization of established benefits such as compensation and pension, vocational rehabilitation and employment services, and Post-9/11 GI Bill and other education benefits. Recent changes to the Post-9/11 GI Bill program illustrate the need for a direct link to Indian Country. We are using every avenue available to us to ensure that Veterans know how changes to that program will directly affect them, and OTGR will be a vital resource for Tribal leaders and a conduit for feedback.

One area that VA believes deserves special attention is the Native American Direct Loan Program (NADL), a vital tool in VA's efforts to provide housing options for Native American Veterans. NADL is available for Native American Veterans, and for qualified non-Native American Veterans who are married to Native American spouses, to purchase, construct or improve a home on trust land or to refinance an existing NADL at a lower interest rate. OTGR is working with VBA to increase VA's efforts in Indian Country and Alaska to educate eligible Veterans about this important program. Our goal is to make sure every eligible Veteran understands the value of the NADL benefit as a long-term housing solution.

OTGR will also work with Tribal leaders to address burial and memorial issues. On August 15, 2011, the Secretary approved the VA's first grant to establish a Veterans cemetery on Tribal trust land, as authorized in Public Law No. 109-461 (Dec. 22, 2006). In FY 2011, VA made the first three Tribal Veterans cemetery grants. The Rosebud Sioux Tribe was awarded \$6.9 million and the Yurok Tribe was awarded \$3.3 million to establish new Tribal Veterans' cemeteries, and the Pascua Yaqui Tribe was awarded \$323 thousand to complete renovations to an existing cemetery.

VA must measure our progress and hold ourselves to a high standard of achievement if we are to accomplish our goals. This starts with compiling recommendations from Tribal leaders and tracking these action items to completion. VA does not promise that every recommendation received will be adopted, but we do commit to ensuring Tribal leaders' and Veterans' voices are heard and considered. A stronger relationship between the Tribes and VA will lead to better results and outcomes for Native American Veterans.

Collaboration with Indian Health Service (IHS)

On October 1, 2010, VA and IHS signed an updated Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The Memorandum's principal goals are for VA and IHS to promote patient-centered collaborations in consultation with Tribes. Although national in scope, the MOU provides the necessary flexibility to tailor programs through local implementation. VA leadership believes that by bringing together the strengths and resources of each organization, we will improve the health status of American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans.

VA and IHS staff have been working together to develop specific recommendations and action items related to the MOU. This work has been focused on areas such as services and benefits, coordination of care, health information technology, implementation of new technologies, payment and reimbursement, sharing of services, cultural competency and awareness, training and recruitment, and others. VA and IHS have made progress in many of these areas, and will continue to monitor progress through periodic meetings and quarterly updates to VA and IHS leadership.

Most recently, VA and IHS produced a proposed draft agreement that sets forth the underlying terms and conditions for reimbursement by VA to IHS and Tribal health facilities for direct care services provided by IHS and tribal health facilities to eligible American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans. The proposed draft agreement, which was released for tribal consultation in April 2012, calls for demonstration sites; defines the eligible service populations and reimbursable services; discusses quality, payment methodologies, and claims submission; and includes appeals processes, confidentiality of health information, and information security. After tribal consultation, VA and IHS will make any needed revisions to the proposed draft agreement and design an implementation plan that will allow all parties to move forward expeditiously while having an opportunity to work through issues that may arise.

Collaboration with American Indian and Alaska Native Tribes

On a separate but parallel track, and consistent with the Administration's goal to increase access to care for Veterans, the Alaska VA Healthcare System negotiated and entered into agreements with Tribal Health Programs in Alaska under which Alaska VA will reimburse Alaska Tribal Health Programs (ATHP) for direct care services provided to eligible Veterans. These agreements will strengthen both the VA and Alaska Tribal Health Program systems to increase access to care for Native and non-Native Veterans particularly those in remote and rural areas served by Alaska Tribal Health Programs.

The effort to establish this agreement began one year ago following Secretary Shinseki's visit to Alaska. Since that time, the Alaska VA and the Alaska Tribal Health Program organizations have met on a regular basis to craft the agreement. We are now scheduling briefings to Tribal Leaders about VA health care eligibility and enrollment requirements. Additionally, the Alaska VA is coordinating training sessions for Alaska Tribal Health Program staff on VA benefits and eligibility and enrollment processes to encourage and facilitate enrollment of eligible Veterans into VA's system. Special

recognition goes out to our partners at IHS and Tribal Leaders as our ongoing work to establish a national underlying agreement with IHS informed the efforts in Alaska.

To address substance abuse and mental health issues among Veterans, VA has worked with Veterans Treatment Courts across the country. These Courts identify treatment options for many of our Veterans with substance use disorders or mental health conditions. OTGR is working with VHA to create a Veterans Treatment Court "How To" guide to help identify and link Native American Veterans involved with the criminal justice system with VA resources and other providers as an alternative to incarceration. The anticipated release of this guide is scheduled for September 2012. Our goal is to provide Tribal governments the resources they need to incorporate, at their discretion, elements of the Veterans Treatment Court model that may promote healing in their communities. This model may not work for every Tribal justice system, but these practices generally are consistent with the holistic approach to criminal justice practiced by many tribal justice systems and may be a valuable tool at their disposal. Local circumstances will help define our ability to implement many of these best practices, but we must learn from our experiences and leverage our successes.

Conclusion

Secretary Shinseki's leadership has enabled VA to move forward with developing partnerships with Tribal Governments to enhance access to services and benefits for American Indian and Alaska Natives. VA provides high quality care and services to Native American Veterans and our partnerships with both IHS and Tribes will enhance our ability to provide care closer to home. We can and will do more to increase access to and utilization of benefits such as compensation and pension, vocational rehabilitation and employment services, and Post-9/11 GI Bill and other education benefits that they have earned. Additionally, we are pleased to have been able to move forward with the first grants for tribal cemeteries in 2011 and look forward to increase outreach for this program.

We see a future where American Indian and Alaska Native Tribal governments view VA as an organization of integrity that advocates on behalf of Native American Veterans for their needs. We see a future where VA demonstrates its commitment to Native American Veterans by being culturally competent, respecting the unique sovereign status of Tribes, and reaching out to Veterans in their communities. We are committed to building relationships with Tribal leaders built on a culture of trust and respect. We see a bright future, but there is still much to be done.

Thank you again for the opportunity to discuss VA's programs and services for American Indians and Alaska Natives. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.