

Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe

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Programs & Services for Native Veterans

Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Oversight Hearing

Wayne Burke, Tribal Chairman

Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe of Nevada

May 24, 2012

Our Native people have lived and sustained the life of a warrior; our ancestors and relatives fought and defended our tribal nations to secure food, homelands, and to protect the young, the old... the family.

That warrior spirit is passed on in our songs, our stories, our dances, and our traditions. Many of our battles against the United States, along with massacres perpetrated against the Native Nations are not found in history books or taught in schools, but they are passed on through oral teachings. From young to old... some stories are to never to be told again.

As with the old people, the younger generations continue to answer the call to arms and serve our tribal and federal nations...taking that warrior spirit with them. We serve in the Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines, Cost Guard, and National Guard. As with all veterans, representing all the nations under the United States Flag, we serve with honor, dignity and the desire to protect, fight, and win battles.

With conflicts and the continued threat of terrorism on those who live in all regions and lands of the globe, the United States military will continue to provide that protection and service through our men and woman who enlist in the armed forces.

As our warriors return home, I see the demand and need for advocacy and support for our veterans. Cultural traditions and beliefs are a significant part in the manner in which tribes and Native people prepare, sustain, heal, and survive war. These cultural beliefs and ways of life need to be recognized and used to offer and provide more services and resources to Native Veterans.

Per population, more Native Veterans serve in the United States Government than any other ethnic group.

Veterans Administration

The VA must understand and know the population they serve. Tribes from the North, South, East, and West all have distinct traditions and beliefs. The VA is a complex system which is intimidating and frustrating for veterans to navigate. As a young Marine returning from Africa, and being discharged shortly after, I was told I could get my teeth cleaned 90 days after my discharge, and I had a GI Bill somewhere. Services through the VA should be transparent and more accessible. Veterans need to know what services and resources are available.

Education

Educational benefits and enrolling into college has become very cumbersome, expensive and intimidating. I have spoken to Veterans' representatives from colleges in Northern Nevada, and they have reported the GI Bill and accessing those funds has become very complex, and require extensive reporting and knowledge in obtaining and ensuring college courses meet the GI Bill regulations. Transfer credits, and criteria for higher education credits is becoming increasingly more complicated.

Mental Health Services

With the growing number of Veterans who have served on foreign shores, and have been exposed to the harmful effects of chemical/biological weapons, stress, and combat action; we are not prepared or have limited resources to provide services from documented cases of PTSD, depression, suicide, and other emotional/mental health issues. Many of our reservations

are found in extreme rural areas of the country where ambulatory and mental health services are only available on a limited schedule.

Business and Mortgage Loans

How does a Veteran receive a business or home loan? I have gone to the local Small Business Administration and I was advised banks are not approving business loans because of the economic environment. Natives who reside on trust land (Reservations) such as Pyramid Lake and other reservations, cannot access loans because banks will not authorize loans to Indians who live on tribal lands. Tribes in many instances must waive sovereign immunity to receive traditional loans from banks.

Indian Health Services

The advantage and disadvantage... Big Brother is always watching and regulating. As Tribal Nations, we must adhere and conform to the operational standards of federal agencies which regulate health care, which includes appropriations, services, resources, and most importantly contract health services and paying the medical bills. When bills and contracted health services are not paid in a timely manner, Tribal members are taken to creditors, are refused services, and wait for authorization from Indian Health Services. I have had the opportunity to meet with Dr. Roubideaux – Director IHS, she so eloquently put it: “We must hold our Veterans harmless from the system.”

The Memorandum of Understanding between the VA and IHS was signed in 2010, under the authority: The Indian Health Care Improvement Act, 25 U.S.C. Section 1645, 1647; 38 U.S.C. Sections 523(a), 6301-6307, 8153.

Under the current MOU, what is the charge, the authority, and who is responsible for ensuring the IHS and VA are working in collaboration with Tribal Nations, and the government-to-government/trust obligations are being met. The first time I had ever heard or seen of this MOU was in 2011. Who or what agency is ensuring regulation and compliance with the MOU?

Our elected Tribal Leaders and Government

The Tribes continue to manage and support their communities through existing 638 contracts, Federal grants, and revenue generated programming, and economic development. Under continued resolutions, regulations, and federal statutes, Tribal governments continue to meet the demands of those we serve, or to the best of our abilities.

I have no doubt in my mind that our Tribal Nations have the ability and resources to collaborate and assist the Federal Government and Federal agencies in effecting and supporting policies and regulations that can support our Veterans.

My request of this committee

Appropriate funding and authorize Veteran liaisons/caseworkers to represent and work with Tribal Nations in establishing and providing transportation, services/resources, and secure education and training for Native Veterans and programs such as the VA, Disabled American Veterans, and all regional Veteran Service Offices. These liaisons/caseworkers would assist all Native Veterans in obtaining, securing, and accessing benefits and services. Educating agency staff and establishing a network of services and funding for continued services and resources.

I am very grateful for the support of Nevada Senators Harry Reid, Dean Heller, and Governor Brian Sandoval in their support and acknowledgement of our veteran's issues in Indian Country. I would also like to thank Lt. John Hansen (retired) Disabled American Veterans Service Officer for the collaboration and services he provides to several of the 27 Northern Nevada Tribes, and the work he has done in advocating for our Veterans.

In closing...

I come from a reservation, on a street that has broken down fences, rusty cars, rez dogs, and more importantly, families and children who depend on our programs to protect, serve, and provide for sustainable tribal nations. My home and my street is the greatest place to live in this great land.

To those who serve and answer to the call to arms I say thank you, god speed, and god bless all of us. Dance, pray, and fight with honor.