



MANDAN, HIDATSA & ARIKARA NATION

Three Affiliated Tribes * Fort Berthold Indian Reservation
Tribal Business Council

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Office of the Chairman

Testimony of Mark N. Fox, Chairman Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation of the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation

Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Oversight Hearing on “Recognizing the Sacrifice: Honoring A Nation’s Promise to Native Veterans” November 18, 2019

I. Introduction

Chairman Hoeven, Vice Chairman Udall and Honorable Members of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara (MHA) Nation appreciates the opportunity to provide this testimony for the Committee’s Oversight Hearing on “Recognizing the Sacrifice: Honoring A Nation’s Promise to Native Veterans.” My name is Mark Fox and I am the Chairman of our Tribal Business Council. The homeland of the MHA Nation, also known as the Three Affiliated Tribes, is located along the Missouri River in the west-central part of North Dakota on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation. We have over 16,000 members with about 7,000 living on our Reservation. With me today is Harriet Good Iron. Ms. Good Iron is the mother of Army Corporal Nathan Good Iron, who gallantly sacrificed his life defending our country on November 23, 2006, in Afghanistan. Ms. Good Iron was the 2018 North Dakota Gold Star Mother of the Year.

I. Tribal Military Service and Recognition

I want to provide you with a short overview of the MHA Nation’s history and military service. Before we were federally designated as the Three Affiliated Tribes, each of our tribal nations signed individual peace treaties in 1825 with the United States. Since that time, the Tribes have gone beyond the treaties call to act as an ally of the United States. By enlistment and special detail, the MHA Nation historically has served in support of the United States military. The MHA Nation’s commitment to service would continue from the 19th into the 20th century including World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm, and other major conflicts. A renowned military commander once stated that he “found tribal soldiers to be of great courage, initiative, and intelligence...and they were always volunteers for the most dangerous missions; brave to the point of recklessness; and prove themselves to be soldiers of the highest type.”

During the Second World War the MHA Nation sent over half of our adult male population to Europe, North Africa, and the Pacific. Tribes as a whole served in record numbers between 1941 and 1945. In that time span over 44,000 Native Americans would serve. At the time there were less than 350,000 Native Americans in the United States. A portion of our membership served as Code

Talkers. Though not as well recognized as our Hopi, Navajo, and Lakota brethren the “Ree Talkers” saved countless lives through the use of our language to communicate orders, strategies, and commands.

The exceptionally high service rates of Native Americans in the United States military continues to this day. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs in 2012 there were over 30,000 tribal members in the US military and it is a fact that tribal members serve at a higher rate than any other race or ethnicity.

The MHA Nation takes exceptional pride in recognizing and revering our veterans. Our tribal nation has specific military cemeteries that provide burial grounds and educate on the heroic deeds of our veterans. Reverence for veterans is not only reserved for those who have passed or those who returned home from combat, but for those whose service remains recognized throughout their lives. For example, as many communities throughout the United States shamed, attacked, or ignored military members returning from the Vietnam War, but the MHA Nation welcomed home its members with appreciation and honor. That same recognition and reverence continues to this day with military members and veterans being honored at tribal meetings, community events, and traditional ceremonies and celebrations.

Tribal recognition and support of veterans goes beyond just words and honorariums. To date, the MHA Nation has spent over seven million dollars for the construction of a Veteran’s Affairs Building. The Tribe has also expended more than five million of its own dollars since 2006 on programs specifically for veterans.

II. Difficulties of Veterans Returning Home

Veterans returning home from military service continue to struggle daily. Many suffer from alcohol and drug abuse, inadequate health care, a lack of education, and limited job opportunities. Though the Tribe has expended significant funds and manpower in assisting its veterans we desperately need additional federal assistance. Providing cost effective, modernized, and accessible healthcare to our veterans is one of the most important issues facing the MHA Nation today. The bills before this Committee represent a small, but important, step in assisting the MHA Nation in supporting and assisting our veterans.

Native American Veterans face unique challenges after exiting military service. Upon returning home Native veterans face high unemployment and severely limited economic opportunities. A 2010 U.S. Census Bureau report found that Native American veterans held the lowest median income of all veterans. That median income at just over \$27,000 is almost half of the highest median income. The lower poor median income is a reflection of the extreme socio-economic poverty in Indian Country. The unemployment rate on reservations is more than twice the national average of 4.9 percent. Some reservations face unemployment that is greater than 60 percent.

The lack of jobs and economic security does more than just effect the financial welfare of native veterans. It is well accepted that economic insecurity and economic stressors have a direct effect on alcohol and drug use rates. Combined with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other military conditions our native veterans suffer extreme rates of alcohol and drug disease. These all combine to cause Native Americans to have less access to affordable and quality treatment options.

The lack of economic opportunities is compounded by the difficulty that MHA Nation veterans face in securing even basic health services from a Veterans Administration (VA) facility. While the Tribe has a small veterans assistance program on the Reservation it is drastically understaffed and underfunded. This program can only provide minimal essential services. To reach a more robust VA facility requires a 4-hour drive. Harsh winter weather conditions make even the shortest drives treacherous from November to April in North Dakota.

The impact of unemployment, underemployment, and travel distances for health care services on Native veterans cannot be understated. Veterans are often forced to choose between dangerous and expensive travel for health services and paying for basic necessities. As a result, many tribal veterans choose to “tough it out.” This choice to simply forego treatment due to either distance, time, or cost only compounds the mental and physical ailments of our veterans.

III. Specific Bill Testimony

The bills before this Committee are good steps in assisting native veterans. However, they are simply first steps and additional proposed legislation is necessary. The MHA Nation faces significant underfunding for our Veterans programs. We can only fund two employees and our Tribe requires a significant increase in funding for an expansion of services available to veterans from other health providers including the Indian Health Services.

To that end Senate Bill 1001, the Tribal Veteran Heal Care Enhancement Act, is a positive step toward assisting tribes in its pursuit of better outcomes for veterans. The ability to cover certain copays is important as it will relieve some economic stress on our veterans. However, I would urge you to greatly expand this bill. The MHA Nation needs additional clinical and administrative staff on our Reservation. Saving veterans time and money on travel by providing services on the Reservation is paramount. These men and women served our Country. We must be able to give them the services they deserve.

I also stand in support of Senate Bill 2365. The bill will help our members who are located in urban centers who we cannot reach or assist. However, that will amount to an additional cost that the VA cannot fully fund as of today. It is vitally important that you increase the total funding available to Tribes.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, I encourage this Committee to honor the commitments of the MHA Nation veterans. The Tribe has honored its commitment to peace and to act as an ally of the United States. Recommending the passage of the two bills before this Committee is necessary. However, the appropriate step for this Committee to recommend is a significant expansion of the VA programs and VA funding available to Tribes. The geographical and economic limitations of the Tribes require unique and forward-thinking solutions. Providing additional funding to Tribes to oversee on-Reservation programs is an important part of honoring Native veteran's service and the trust responsibility of the United States.

I would like to thank you for your time and look forward to working with the Committee to finding the appropriate solutions to the problems facing our military members and veterans.