
Office of Tribal Government Relations Newsletter ~ January 2014



Deputy Assistant Secretary John Garcia
and Director Stephanie Birdwell

Greetings, welcome to the January edition of our VA Office of Tribal Government Relations (OTGR) National Monthly Newsletter.

I always like to start my messages by reflecting on where we've been and what we've been up to in recent weeks. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to accompany *Southwest Region* specialist Homana (Lorae) Pawiki and Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Office of Rural Health staff member Adam Bluth on a trip to New Mexico earlier in the month. There is no substitute for going out into the local communities, meeting with tribal leaders, tribal health directors, Veterans and their families to experience and understand the challenges and opportunities that exist when serving our Veterans at home. We are thankful to the Pueblos of Isleta, Kewa, Jemez and Taos for hosting us and sharing information about the important work they are doing for Veterans. We were impressed by the commitment and dedication of tribal leaders and local providers and saw some great examples of best practices we would like to highlight through our newsletter in the months ahead. I also accompanied VHA Homeless program staff to a United States Interagency Council on Homelessness roundtable discussion on American Indian and Alaska Native homelessness hosted by the Department of Interior. This was an interesting discussion and we are particularly proud of the progress VA has made with federal, state, tribal and community partners in making a positive impact in the area of Veteran homelessness. I also accompanied VHA Chief Business Office staff on a briefing before the Tribal Self Governance Advisory Committee during their quarterly meeting held in DC this month. The focus of the briefing and questions focused on the VA Reimbursement agreement process. We received both positive feedback and specific feedback about challenges that were being experienced which was very helpful and which VHA leadership and staff are working to remedy and resolve.

Terry Bentley has been busy in the *Western Region*, making site visits (along with Jodie Waters, VISN 20 Strategic Planner and Rural Health Consultant) to the Chemawa Indian Health Service Unit, a location that serves the needs of Indian families from Western Oregon. The purpose of the visit was to offer assistance related to Veteran health care and benefits while also discussing concerns related to the VA-IHS Reimbursement Agreement. Terry and Jodie also made it to Portland to present to the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board (which included representatives from 36 tribes) to provide updates on VA engagement with tribes as well as the VA Reimbursement Agreement process.

Mary Culley, specialist for the *Southern Plains and Eastern (Southeast)* regions was joined by Laura Rodriguez of the Veterans Benefits Administration in making a presentation to the Southern Plains Indian Housing Authority during their meeting held in Norman, Oklahoma. A lot of interest was expressed in the VA's Native American Direct Loan mortgage product available to Veterans living in Indian Country. The Oklahoma City VA Medical Center Director Marsh hosted the medical center's first annual luncheon for tribal leaders. The VA leadership request of tribal leaders during this important outreach event was to try and emphasize for Veterans the importance of enrolling not just in VA health care but also accessing the benefits the Veterans earned through their service.

Peter Vicaire, in addition to working on planning the Veterans Training Summit in Idaho, providing technical assistance to Veterans, tribal leaders and health directors from across the Central and Eastern (Northeast) Regions is working on an article focused on VA sweat lodges. He traveled to the St. Cloud, Minnesota VA to interview leadership, staff and Veterans about the sweat lodge they have on campus.

Looking ahead, the Veterans training and outreach schedule is really shaping up for the year. These events are focused on providing training and important information on all aspects of access to services and benefits for our Veterans. Dates and locations are as follows: February 21, Veterans Benefits Enrollment Fair will be in Holdenville, Oklahoma sponsored in conjunction with the Muscogee (Creek) Nation and the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma. Contact mary.culley@va.gov for more information; March 20-21 is the Southwest Region Veterans Training Summit to be held in Flagstaff, Arizona at the Twin Arrows Navajo Casino Resort; April 9 the Ute Indian Tribe Veterans Health and Benefit Training at Fort Duchesne, Utah. Contact lorae.pawiki@va.gov for registration and details about these events; April 9-10 the Western/Central Region Training Summit will be held in Lewiston, Idaho at the Clearwater River Casino. This Veterans training event will be hosted by the Nez Perce Tribe as well as the Confederated Tribes of Coeur d'Alene. Contact peter.vicaire@va.gov or terry.bentley@va.gov for more information.

Last but certainly not least, our VA Intergovernmental Affairs Deputy Assistant Secretary, John Garcia, Vietnam Veteran who hails from New Mexico, who many of you have met and visited with these past three years, decided it is time for him to return home to New Mexico where he will continue his work on behalf of Veterans and their families. We've learned a lot from Mr. Garcia during his time with us here in DC. We've been inspired by his leadership, dedication and commitment to expanding opportunities and improving the lives for Veterans and their families. Serving our nation's heroes is a deeply personal calling for Mr. Garcia and we have been blessed to work with and for him. We wish him all the best on the next stage of the journey. This newsletter edition is dedicated to him.

We hope you find this newsletter edition informative and as always, we look forward to receiving your feedback via phone call or email.

Warm Regards – Stephanie



Editor's Note: Last month, we ran an article titled, "U.S. Military Changes Role of Women in Combat: Native American Women Warriors in History." It was erroneously attributed to a "Roy Price" when the author's name is actually **Roy Cook**. We apologize to Mr. Cook and would like to thank him for alerting us to this mistake.

U.S. Department of Justice Public Safety and Victim Services Grant



Click [HERE](#) for a link to the DOJ solicitation website – for the possibility of a Veterans Tribal Court Grant

The U.S. Department of Justice is pleased to announce that it is seeking applications for funding to improve public safety and victim services in Tribal communities. This solicitation provides federally-recognized Tribes and Tribal consortia an opportunity to develop a comprehensive and coordinated approach to public safety and victimization issues and to apply for funding. DOJ's existing Tribal government-specific programs are included in, and available through, this single Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation. **The application deadline is 7:00 p.m. ET on Monday, March 24, 2014.**

The Department's Tribal government-specific competitive grant programs outlined in this solicitation are referred to as Purpose Areas. Applicants may apply for funding under the Purpose Area(s) that best addresses Tribes' concerns related to public safety, criminal and juvenile justice, and the needs of victims/survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and other forms of violence. Below is a snapshot of the Purpose Areas. See detailed information for each Purpose Area in Part F of the solicitation:

1. Public Safety and Community Policing (COPS)
2. Comprehensive Tribal Justice Systems Strategic Planning (BJA)
3. Justice Systems, and Alcohol and Substance Abuse (BJA)
4. Corrections and Correctional Alternatives (BJA)
5. Violence Against Women Tribal Governments Program (OVW)
6. Children's Justice Act Partnerships for Indian Communities (OVC)
7. Comprehensive Tribal Victim Assistance Program (OVC)
8. Juvenile Justice (OJJDP)
9. Tribal Youth Program (OJJDP)



“Tribes Struggle to House Their ‘Invisibly Homeless’ Veterans”

Here’s an article from Terray Sylvester - which can be found [HERE](#). It originally appeared in the Dec. 23, 2013 issue of High Country News (www.hcn.org)

“For nearly a decade, Seven Eggs has stayed with his son in the town of Crow Agency, on southeast Montana’s Crow Reservation. Their faded green house, built roughly 40 years ago by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, is deteriorating. The siding is peeling, the roof leaks; one bathroom is a lightless construction zone with unfinished wiring and a gap in the shower where framing shows through. Black mold grows on the walls, and though Seven Eggs scrubs it away with bleach, it returns, with a heavy scent that lingers in the back of the throat.

Seven Eggs (his Crow name, which he prefers to Ira Bad Bear, his American one) spent two years as a U.S. Army combat engineer in Vietnam. “It was a great accomplishment for me,” he says. But since returning in 1971, he has suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and rarely owned a home.

In his first years back on the reservation – wrestling with anxiety, alcoholism and nightmares that still steal his sleep – he stayed with his mother or camped on the nearby prairie. “I felt safer out there,” he says. “I was kind of expecting trouble from every corner.” He later married and lived with his wife’s family until the couple bought their own home. But once they separated, Seven Eggs moved into a tepee behind the house where he now lives. When the snow began to fall that first winter, his son invited him to stay inside as a guest. But the arrangement is tenuous: His son’s relatives own the house, making it hard for Seven Eggs to apply for tribal grants to repair it, and leading him to wonder when he will have to move again.

One Crow official calls Seven Eggs’ situation “invisible homelessness.” In urban areas, folks often end up in shelters or on the streets, where they are easily recognized. But in Indian Country, where housing shortages are common and shelters in short supply, families cope by sharing spare rooms, couches and floor space. This is one reason why many Native vets like Seven Eggs have slipped through the cracks of HUD-VASH, an otherwise effective federal program that aims to end veteran homelessness.

Revived by President George W. Bush in 2008, HUD-VASH is now the centerpiece of an Obama administration push to end veteran homelessness by 2015. But red tape prevents many veterans in Indian Country from participating, even though in 2010, Native American vets were significantly more likely to be homeless than



their white, non-Hispanic counterparts. While Native Americans enlist at a rate generally twice that of other races, they return home to above-average disability rates and the lowest incomes.

All of this means HUD-VASH is least available to those who most need it, argues Zoe LeBeau, a Minnesota-based housing consultant who has long fought to bring the program to reservations. "VASH vouchers are the number-one tool we have to stabilize housing for veterans," she says. "And tribes don't have access to them."

Administered by HUD and the Department of Veterans Affairs, HUD-VASH provides Section 8 housing vouchers to chronically homeless veterans, ensuring they spend no more than 30 percent of their income on rent. Since many recipients suffer from addiction and other ailments, the rental funds are paired with VA clinical and social services. Backed by \$425 million in housing funds to date, this model has helped reduce veteran homelessness by over 24 percent since 2009, while overall homelessness declined just 5 percent. But of the roughly 58,000 vouchers awarded so far, only 600 have gone to Native Americans.



The main barrier is the 1996 Native American Housing and Self-Determination Act (NAHASDA), which controls most federal housing funds distributed to tribes, explains Deana O'Hara, a senior adviser in HUD's Office of Native American Programs. A conflict between that law and the Housing Act of 1937, under which HUD-VASH is administered, prevents veterans from using vouchers for federally



subsidized houses on reservations. Most reservation housing is federally subsidized.

Even if a veteran finds a home without this conflict, many reservation houses are falling apart and don't meet HUD's standards. At the same time, tribal housing departments can't administer VASH vouchers, forcing veterans on reservations to navigate extra layers of bureaucracy with outside housing authorities. And all of this assumes HUD recognizes a Native American veteran as homeless in the first place. But the agency distributes vouchers based on a definition of homelessness that doesn't include those staying with relatives. This disqualifies many in Indian Country, where, according to the nonprofit Housing Assistance Council, up to 9 percent of homes are overcrowded – three times the national average.

HUD and VA staffers have worked for over a year to bring HUD-VASH to reservations, but some now think congressional action is necessary. "There are so many hurdles," O'Hara says. "There are so many hoops."

For now, many Native American veterans who receive VASH vouchers face a choice: Leave their communities or give up a chance to have a home of their own. Joe Morrisette, who runs a veterans shelter on South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation, has seen voucher recipients search for housing outside the reservation in Rapid City and Hot Springs, but usually only young single men. "Our families are real tight-knit," he says. "A lot of the older veterans who qualify don't want to leave. We get close to getting them in, then they change their minds."

Seven Eggs would face this choice if he applied. He has considered leaving the Crow Reservation to find housing in nearby Hardin or Billings. But even if money weren't an issue, he's reluctant to leave his grandchildren, whom he helps raise. He also hosts dances and sweats, which soothe his nerves and help him sleep.

Teresa Pittman, a regional HUD-VASH coordinator for the VA, says prying veterans out of their communities deprives them of much-needed support networks. "HUD-VASH vouchers are about letting people live where they want to live. We don't want to just end homelessness in cities, but continue to see it in other pockets of the country."

The Crow Tribe's administrative offices occupy a former Indian Health Services hospital on the banks of the Little Bighorn River in Crow Agency, on the edge of the famous battlefield where Crow scouts perished beside George Armstrong Custer in 1876. The tribe's Veterans Affairs staff works in a snug old triage room, just wide enough for four desks. In the corner hangs a T-shirt that reads, "We Were There Too," a memento from Crow veteran Mitchelene Big Man, who led a color guard of Native American women vets in Barack Obama's second inaugural parade. The Crow have a long history of U.S. military service: According



to tribal records, they have fought in every major conflict since the Battle of the Little Bighorn, from the Spanish American War to Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

In the last two years, the tribe has counted some 420 veterans among its 11,000 members. "I'll show you what we have them fill out," says Mary Louise LaForge, an outreach worker, as she flips through a stack of papers. "Almost every single one of them (writes), 'need home.' Everybody needs a home."

Seven Eggs works here part-time, combing the reservation in his pickup, urging veterans to register with the tribe – a first step toward enrolling for VA services. He doesn't do it for the paycheck, which he spends mostly on gas. "You have kids coming back from Iraq and coming back from Afghanistan," he says. "I don't want them to go through what I did."

Congress is considering several measures to address the problem, but their fate remains uncertain. Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., has sponsored a NAHASDA reauthorization bill designed to bring VASH vouchers to tribal land, and a corresponding fix has been introduced in the House by Reps. Derek Kilmer, D-Wash., and Tom Cole, R-Okla. Neither bill has emerged from committee. HUD's 2014 budget, sponsored by Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., would create a \$3 million HUD-VASH pilot program on reservations, but it has been tangled in D.C.'s fiscal gridlock.

Meanwhile, the Crow are taking matters into their own hands, planning a 15-unit project called the Apsaalooke Warriors Apartments, with medical and tribal Veterans Affairs staff on site. To cover construction, the tribe plans to sell federal tax credits and has applied for affordable housing grants. But because the project would house low-income veterans, rental revenue won't cover annual operating costs, estimated at up to \$150,000. HUD-VASH could help. "If we have the opportunity to apply for VASH grants, we will," says housing director Karl Little Owl.

If they can't, the tribe will use its NAHASDA funds instead. But that money is already scarce. More than 500 families are waiting for new tribal housing, and Little Owl says his department rarely builds new homes because it spends so much maintaining existing ones, which are generally dilapidated. Still, Crow Vice Secretary Shawn Back Bone, who has spearheaded the apartments, argues that public support and an overwhelming demand for veteran housing justify the project's expense: "We'll fill that probably within the first week."

Seven Eggs says he'll be among the first in line. "If one of those homes comes available, if I'm eligible, I'd get right in there. Just so I'd have something to come home to."

Natives & the Military: 10 Facts You Might Not Know

Here's an interesting, recent (1/9/2014) article from Vincent Schilling at [Indian Country Today](#). To read it there, click [HERE](#).

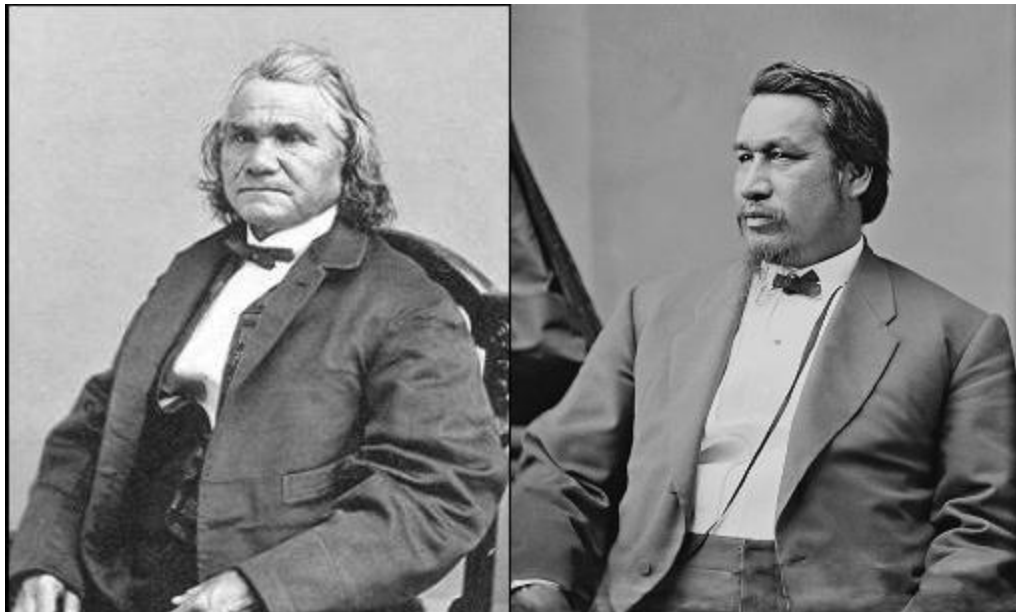
Considering American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans have served in every branch of the U.S. Military for well over the past 200 years, It goes without saying that their efforts and histories of distinguished services should be recognized. In addition to any recognition, while studying the facts surrounding Native Veterans through such reports as released by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) or the historical accounts of War Department officials, you will discover some interesting facts about Native Veterans outside the fact that American Indians serve at a high rate and have a higher concentration of female servicemembers. Here are 10 interesting and surprising facts we found:



Detail from cover of *The Blue, the Grey and the Red*, still one of the under-told stories of the U.S. Civil War.

An Active Role in the Civil War

According to an extract from *'A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion by Frederick H. Dyer'* In 1862, several Indian Home Guard Regiments were organized and expedited in Indian territories and utilized for several years by the Union Army during the Civil War. Statistics show just fewer than 3,600 Native Americans served in the Union Army during the war.



Stan Watie, left, & Ely S. Parker (Courtesy Wikipedia)

Two Civil War Generals of Distinction

Stan Watie (Cherokee) joined the Confederate Army to become a notoriously fearsome General and the last Confederate General to Surrender. Ely S. Parker (Seneca) whose father fought in the War of 1812, enlisted into the Union Army rose to become General and served on the staff of Ulysses S. Grant.



Cherokee patient, World War I. U.S. Base Hospital No. 41, Paris, France, c. 1917-18.
(Courtesy U.S. National Library of Medicine)

12,000 for World War I

When World War I started, American Indians were not considered U.S. citizens, but that did not stop approximately 12,000 Natives from volunteering to serve in the U.S. military. In addition, four American Indian soldiers serving in the 142nd Infantry of the 36th Texas-Oklahoma National Guard Division received the Croix de Guerre medal from France.



Charlotte Edith (Anderson) Monture
Courtesy womensmemorial.org

Native Women Doing Their Part

During WWI, 14 American Indian women served in the Army Nurse Corps, with two of them serving overseas. Mrs. Cora E. Sinnard, (Oneida) and Charlotte Edith (Anderson) Monture (Mohawk) both served as Army Nurses in France at a military hospital to lend their skills toward the war efforts overseas. Monture, who referred to her service as ‘the adventure of a lifetime,’ died in 1996 at the age of 106. October 29, 1940, U.S. Attorney General Robert Jackson draws the third draft lottery number from a large jar, as President Franklin Roosevelt looks on. (Courtesy nationalww2museum.org)

A Draft Could Have Been Avoided

War Department officials have stated, that during WWII, if the entire population had enlisted at the same rate American Indians did, Selective Service would have been unnecessary. According to the Selective Service in 1942, at least 99 percent of all eligible Indians, healthy males aged 21 to 44, had registered for the draft. The annual enlistment for Native Americans jumped from 7,500 in the summer of 1942 to 22,000 at the beginning of 1945.



In a file photo U.S. Marines of the 28th Regiment of the Fifth Division raise the American flag atop Mt. Suribachi, Iwo Jima, on Feb. 23, 1945. Ira Hayes (Pima) is on the far left.

The Ten Percenters

By the end of the WWII, 24,521 reservation Indians and another 20,000 off-reservation Indians had served in the military effort – or 10 percent of the American Indian population. This combined figure of 44,500 represented one-third of all able-bodied Indian men from 18 to 50 years of age. In some tribes, the percentage of men in the military reached as high as 70 percent.

800 Native Women Warriors Strong

Throughout WWII, nearly 800 American Indian women served in the U.S. military. Elva (Tapedo) Wale, Kiowa; Corporal Bernice (Firstshoot) Bailey of Lodge Pole, Montana, Beatrice (Coffey) Thayer and Alida (Whipple) Fletcher are just a few of the servicewomen that served during WWII. These brave women served with such units as the Army Corps, the Army Nurse Corps and as WAVES, ‘Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service.’

Photo # 208-NS-4350-2 Three N. American Marine Corps Women Reservists



The Native American Marine Corps Women Reservists are pictured at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina on October 16, 1943. Pictured, from left, are: Minnie Spotted Wolf (Blackfoot Tribe), Celia Mix (Potawatomi Tribe), and Viola Eastman (Chippewa Tribe). (Courtesy U.S. Marine Corps)



U.S. Army troops taking a break while on patrol in Vietnam War (Courtesy R.W. Trewyn, Ph.D./U.S. Army Operations in Vietnam)

90 Percent Volunteer Through Vietnam Era

Throughout the Vietnam Era, American Indians enlisted in the military to the tune of more than 42,000 – 90 percent of them were volunteers, with the others serving through draft selection. After Vietnam, Natives have continued to serve in high numbers. Since that time, Native servicemembers have seen military action and combat in Grenada, Panama, Somalia, the Gulf War, and in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation New Dawn (OND).



Navy Warriors

According to the 2012 VA report, nearly 50 percent of Native servicemembers served in the Navy in comparison to 14 percent of all other servicemembers of other ethnicities.



Five Years and You're Out – Less for Officers

The VA also states that approximately 70 percent of Native servicemembers served five years or fewer and about 27 percent serve between six and 20 years. In terms of officers, only 6 percent of Native servicemembers were officers, while other ethnicities are roughly 2.5 times that rate.



Rep. Markwayne
Mullin (R-2nd/OK)

President Obama Signs Bill for Native Veterans Memorial at the National Museum of the American Indian

President Barack Obama signed H.R. 2319, the Native American Veterans' Memorial Amendments Act of 2013, into law on Thursday, December 26. The bill authorizes the National Museum of the American Indian to raise funds and start work on a memorial for American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian veterans. The memorial will be located on the museum's property on the National Mall. The House passed the bill on December 11 by a vote of 398 to 0. The Senate approved it by unanimous consent on December 20.

"I have heard from people I represent and from outside our district that the construction of this memorial means a great deal to Native Americans who served this nation and to their families," Rep. Markwayne Mullin (R-Oklahoma), a member of the Cherokee Nation who co-sponsored the bill, said in a press release. "It is important that we properly honor these brave soldiers and tell their stories for generations to come."

The Passing of Veteran Forrest Gerard and the Canon of Indian Country

Here's a wonderful article written by Mark Trahant (Shoshone-Bannock) which can be found in Indian Country Today [HERE](#). Forrest Gerard was a veteran, having served in the U.S. Air Corps in WWII, where he flew 35 combat missions as a member of a bomber crew over Nazi-occupied Europe

"What is "The Canon of Indian Country?" Those stories that are recited in schools, the ones most young people know by heart, tales of valor, excellence and an optimistic future. We do have great modern stories to tell.

How leaders like Joe Garry or Lucy Covington out maneuvered Congress and put an end to the nonsense called termination. Or how Taos leaders patiently pressed the United States for the return of the sacred Blue Lake, even though that effort that took nearly seven decades. Or how a summer program in New Mexico helped create an entire generation of American Indian and Alaska Native lawyers.

But there is no canon. So important stories drift about in individual memory, forgotten far too easily, instead of being told again and again. The story of Forrest Joseph Gerard is one that ought to be required in any Indian Country canon. He died on December 28, 2013, in Albuquerque.

Forrest Gerard was born on Montana's Blackfeet Reservation on January 15, 1925, on a ranch near the Middle Fork of the Milk River. He told me that his "childhood I had there would have been the envy of any young boy in the United States. We had a horse of our own. We could walk maybe 15 or 20 yards have some of the best trout fishing in northern Montana. We had loving parents. We had love, support and discipline. And this was my universe, this was a world I knew."

That world he knew changed many times in his early life. During the Great Depression his family moved into the "city" of Browning so his father could take a job. After his high school graduation, Gerard was eager to join the military and enter World War II. He was only 19 on his first bombing mission on a B-24 with the 15th Air Force. "We were forced to face life and death, bravery and fear at a relatively young age. That instilled a little bit of maturity into us that we might not under normal circumstances," Gerard recalled. The military also opened up access to the G.I. Bill of Rights and a college education, the first in his family to have that opportunity.



After college, Gerard worked at jobs that built his personal portfolio at agencies in Montana and Wyoming until moving to Washington, D.C., in 1957 to work for the newly-created Indian Health Service. Over the next decade or so Gerard took a variety of posts, including a coveted Congressional Fellowship, a post at the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Health and Human Services.

But our story picks up in 1971 when Gerard is hired by Senator Henry Jackson, chairman of the Interior and Insular Affairs, as a professional staff member for Indian affairs. Jackson had long been an advocate for termination and his staff assistant, James Gamble, had carried out that policy with a sense of mission. By hiring Gerard, Jackson was reversing course. (He did not fire Gamble, but moved him on other legislative issues, such as parks.)

To send a signal to Indian Country. Jackson issued a statement calling for a Senate resolution reversing House Concurrent Resolution 108 -- the termination proclamation -- and the message was delivered to Yakama Chairman Robert Jim while he was on the Hill. "He rushed out of the building, jumped in a cab, went over to where the NTCA was meeting, burst into the room, interrupted who ever was speaking, and told them Jackson was introducing legislation to reverse House Con. 108," Gerard said. "In that one fell swoop, we did more to reverse Jackson's image in Indian Country."

The next step was more substantial. Turning Richard Nixon's July [1970 message into legislation](#). That next step was the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, eventually signed into law on April 3, 1974.

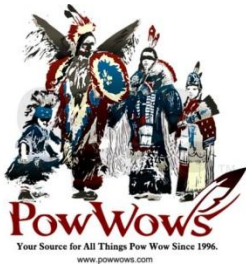
But the legislative train was running. The self-determination act was followed by the Menominee Restoration Act, the Indian Finance Act, and, what Gerard considered his legislative capstone, the Indian Health Care Improvement Act. It's hard, even today, to imagine a string of legislative victories such as what happened during the partnership of Gerard and Jackson. The record speaks for itself.

After leaving the Senate, Gerard worked on Capitol Hill representing tribes until President Jimmy Carter nominated him as the first Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs in the Interior Department. In that post, he set the standard for the job itself, making certain that policy included voices from Indian Country. Gerard wrapped up his career in the private sector, again representing tribes in Washington.

So why should Forrest Gerard's story be in The Canon? Simply this: He traveled from the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana and built a professional career. He was prepared for that moment in time where he was offered a job with enormous potential, shepherding legislation that not only ended termination as a policy, but promoted tribal self-determination as an alternative. Sure, there had been other American Indians working on Capitol Hill, probably just two or three before Gerard, but none were given the authority to act in the name of a full committee chairman and craft law. This was new -- and huge.

After he left the committee, Sen. Jackson asked Gerard if he thought the self-determination process would happen all at once, if tribes would contract for the BIA and IHS? "No," Gerard answered. "There would be steady progress." Nearly forty years later that progress continues. [Today more money](#) is spent on tribally-operated health care than on Indian Health Service operations. It's the same at the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Steady progress by tribal governments. And a story to add to The Canon.



Recognizing American Indian and Alaskan Native Veterans

Here's a piece from Toyacoyah Brown at www.powwows.com. The article can be accessed [HERE](#).

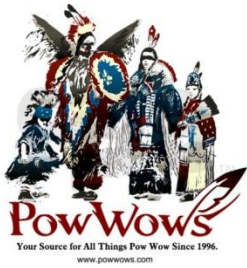
“According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, there are more than 150,000 American Indian and Alaskan Native veterans throughout the United States. The Veterans History Project (VHP) of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress invites these men and women to share their unique stories of military experience. Among VHP’s 250 oral histories from the American Indian and Alaskan Native veterans are the stories of Joseph Beimfohr and Marcella Ryan Le Beau, both American Indians who served in the U.S. military.

Joseph Beimfohr served in the Army during the Iraq/Afghanistan War. When he deployed to Iraq in January 2005, he was exposed to intense hostile fire. During his VHP interview, Beimfohr said, “You can’t just sit there and be paralyzed with fear, because you’re going to get everybody killed.” What he learned from his experiences was that soldiers have to trust their training and instincts. He lost both legs to an explosion, and Beimfohr subsequently learned that the only limitations in his life were self-imposed.



Joseph Beimfohr, Iraq/Afghanistan Veteran

In 1943, Marcella Le Beau had just finished her nurse’s training in her native South Dakota and was working at a hospital in Pontiac, Michigan, when she heard about the Army’s need for nurses. A year later, she was camped out in a cow pasture in Normandy, in the wake of the D-Day invasion, on her way to Paris. “I was young and I didn’t know what war was... I guess in a way that was a saving grace,” Le Beau said.



She never encountered discrimination because of her background; in fact, when colleagues learned that her great-grandfather was a Chief, they assumed she must be an “Indian princess.”



Beimfohr’s and Le Beau’s stories, along with thousands more, may be accessed on VHP’s website, www.loc.gov/vets. The website also provides information on how to record and collect veterans’ stories using VHP’s free Field Kit, a how-to-record-a-story booklet.



The Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress

The United States Congress created the Veterans History Project (VHP) in 2000 as part of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. VHP’s mission is to collect, preserve, and make accessible the personal accounts of American war veterans so that future generations may hear directly from veterans and better understand the realities of war. Here’s a [link to the website](#) and here is one specifically for [American Indian/Alaskan Native Veterans](#).



VA's Office of Tribal Government Relations Training Summit



We are pleased to announce that our next training summit for veterans, their families and service providers will be held at the Clearwater River Casino & Resort on the Nez Perce Reservation in Idaho on April 9-10, 2014. To register (FREE) please visit the website here: <http://www.eventbrite.com/e/veterans-training-summit-tickets-9852083848> or contact Terry Bentley at 541-440-1271 – Terry.Bentley@va.gov or Peter Vicaire at 651-405-5676 - Peter.Vicaire@va.gov.

Rooms can be booked at the Clearwater River Casino (\$49.95/night) 208-746-0723 or at the Red Lion Hotel (\$88/night) 208 799-1000.



Over the 1.5 days, we are scheduled to have presentations on: Vocational Rehabilitation; DOL-VETS; Wyakin Warrior Foundation (2) ; Idaho State Department of Veteran Affairs; Veteran Benefits Administration; Housing: Native American Direct Home Loan Program (NADL); Specially Adapted Housing (SAH); HUD; VA Homeless Programs: Grant and Per Diem; Supportive Services for Veterans Families (SSVF); Fully-Developed Claims; VHA "Healthcare 101"—Eligibility, Enrollment and Billing; Tribal Health Reimbursement; Social Security Administration; Illegal State Taxation of Rez-Domiciled Servicemembers; Veterans Courts/Tribal Courts; Listening Session With Senior VA Leaders; Camp Chaparral Program.

VA Announces Funding Available for Supportive Services For Veterans Families (SSVF) Grant Program



Applications are due by March 14, 2014

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has announced the availability of funds for supportive services grants under the Supportive Services for Veteran Families Program (SSVF). The NOFA, published in the Jan. 14, 2014 Federal Register, contains information concerning the SSVF Program, initial and renewal supportive services grant application processes, and amount of funding available.

The SSVF Program's purpose is to provide supportive services grants to private nonprofit organizations and consumer cooperatives who will coordinate or provide supportive services to very low-income veteran families who: (i) Are residing in permanent housing, (ii) are homeless and scheduled to become residents of permanent housing within a specified time period, or (iii) after exiting permanent housing within a specified time period, are seeking other housing that is responsive to such very low-income veteran family's needs and preferences.

The overriding goal for this NOFA is to ensure that appropriate levels of resources are provided to communities with the greatest need to end veteran homelessness. Under Priority 1, VA will provide up to \$300 million over a 3-year period for non-renewable grants to eligible entities proposing services for one of the 76 priority Continuums of Care (CoC) listed in the NOFA. VA has designed this 3-year effort to provide a surge of resources in communities with the highest need. These 76 locations have been selected based on factors that include current unmet service needs, levels of veteran homelessness, levels of veteran poverty, and the overall size of the veteran population.

Priority 2 is for existing SSVF Program grantees seeking to renew their supportive services grants. To be eligible for renewal of a supportive services grant, the grantee's program concept must be substantially the same with the program concept of the grantee's current grant award.

Priority 3 is for eligible entities applying for initial supportive services grants. To read the NOFA in its entirety, [click here](#).

Aid & Attendance: Some Veterans or Spouses Could Qualify For Special Pension Benefit



Roughly one out of four senior veterans in the United States could qualify for the Aid and Attendance pension benefit under the right conditions. Only about 5 percent of senior veterans are actually receiving this benefit, which can pay up to \$2,085 a month, tax free, for a couple, \$1,759 for a single veteran and \$1,130 for a single surviving spouse.

The Department of Veterans Affairs' improved pension benefit is largely unknown and not easily understood. It allows veterans and surviving spouses who require the regular attendance of another person to assist in eating, bathing, dressing, undressing, medication dosing or using the bathroom to receive additional monetary benefits. It also includes individuals who are blind or in a nursing home because of mental or physical incapacity. Care in an assisted-living facility also qualifies for the benefit.

This important benefit, overlooked by many families with veterans or surviving spouses, is a pension benefit and is not dependent upon service-related injuries. Aid and Attendance can help pay for care in the home, nursing home or assisted-living facility. To be eligible, veterans must have served at least 90 consecutive days with at least one day during a wartime period (World War II, Dec. 7, 1941, through Dec. 31, 1946; Korean War, June 27, 1950, through Jan. 31, 1955; Vietnam, Feb 28, 1961, through May 7, 1975) and have received a discharge from active duty under conditions other than dishonorable.

To determine eligibility, the VA compares the relationship between a claimant's income (Social Security, pension and all other fixed income) and medical expenses (assisted living, home care, skilled nursing, adult daycare and health-insurance premiums). If the claimant spends all his or her income on countable medical expenses, he or she should be entitled to the maximum monthly income from the Department of Veterans Affairs. If the claimant spends a portion of his or her income on care-related medical expenses, he or she may be eligible for a partial benefit.

The VA does not designate a specific dollar figure to determine if someone is eligible for the benefit. The VA looks at every claim individually and makes a net-worth determination based on the circumstances. If there are significant assets, benefits may still be awarded, depending on care expenses.

You can find more information online from the VA [HERE](#).

Veterans Alert: VA ID Cards Can Be Scanned – Identity Theft Risk



Check out the following story about some potential risks associated with your VA ID card. Apparently, the bar code on VA-issued cards can be scanned by a cell phone and provide the card owner's Social Security number. Here's a [related video \[3:25\]](#). "Anyone with a smartphone and a bar code app can scan any Department of Veterans Affairs identification card issued since 2004 and the cardholder's Social Security number immediately pops up on the screen. The Department of Veterans Affairs published warnings about the veterans information cards (VICs) on their website in 2011 and again in July, 2013. The alert states, "Some barcode readers, including those available as applications on cell phones, can scan the bar code on the front of the card, and reveal the veteran's social security number." VA has begun to work on a new type of card, which will not contain a Social Security number. Meanwhile, veterans should treat their current ID cards as just a careful as they do their Social Security card to prevent identity theft."

New Associate Director of the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs



Here's an introductory letter from Raina Thiele, the new Associate Director of the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs – sent out to tribal leaders on January 7th.

"Dear Tribal Leaders, I wanted to reach out to introduce myself. My name is Raina Thiele and I recently took over for Charlie Galbraith as Associate Director of the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs. I most recently served at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) helping to build the president's budget for energy and international affairs programs. I previously worked as a legislative analyst at OMB focusing on issues related to the Department of the Interior. Born and raised in Alaska, I am Dena'ina Athabascan and Yup'ik, and am an enrolled member of Pedro Bay Native Village.

I'm very excited to be working with our Native American and Alaska Native communities on behalf of the President and look forward to getting to know you as we continue our productive work for Indian Country. I will continue to send out relevant information to tribal leaders. Please do not hesitate to contact me at RThiele@who.eop.gov if I can be of help on the issues of importance to your communities. Chin'an (Thank you), Raina Thiele. The White House"

Grant Opportunity – Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)



The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Center for Mental Health Services is accepting applications for Planning and Developing Infrastructure to Improve the Mental Health and Wellness of Children, Youth and Families in American Indian/Alaska Natives (AI/AN) Communities grants. The purpose of this program is to provide tribal and urban Indian communities with tools and resources to plan and design a holistic, community-based, coordinated system of care approach to support mental health and wellness for children, youth and families. Application Deadline: **March 7, 2014**
Award Amount: Up to \$400,000 per year for up to 3 years

Find more information about the [Circles of Care Mental Health and Wellness Grants](#) online.

Society of American Indian Government Employees 11th Annual Training Program



SAIGE will be having their 11th annual training program in Albuquerque, New Mexico on June 8-13 at the Isleta Resort (11000 Broadway SE, Albuquerque, NM 87105). A free shuttle from the ABQ airport will be available – just call (505) 724-3800 to inform when you are arriving. Hotel reservations can be made by calling (877) 747-5382 or (505) 848-1999; attendees must mention the group code SA10614 to receive the special government rate. All reservations must be made before May 9, 2014. Visit the SAIGE website (www.saige.org) for more information to come.

Central Region

(MT, WY, ND, SD, MN, WI, NE, IA, MI)

Wisconsin Indian Veterans Association (Oneida Chapter) Invites You To Spend an Evening With Diane Carlson Evans



1Lt. Diane Carlson Evans, ANC RVN served as a nurse in the United States Army during the Vietnam War and founded the Vietnam Women's Memorial Project in 1984 (now the [Vietnam Women's Memorial Foundation](#)), initiating and leading the effort to add the [Vietnam Women's Memorial](#) to the [Vietnam Veterans Memorial](#) in Washington, DC.



Diane Carlson Evans graduated from nursing school in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Upon graduation, she joined the Army Nurse Corps and served in Vietnam, at age 21, in 1968-1969. She served in the burn unit of the **36th Evacuation Hospital in Vung Tau** and at **Pleiku in the 71st Evacuation Hospital**, 30 miles from the Cambodian border in the Central Highlands, just 10 to 20 minutes by helicopter from the field. Including her one year in Vietnam, Carlson Evans completed a total of 6 years in the Army Nurse Corps.

March 7, 2014 - Social hour 5:30 – 6:30 and Dinner at 6:30

At the Oneida Radisson Bingo-Casino convention center - across from the green bay airport. Broasted chicken, mashed potato, vegetable. etc

Advance tickets \$20.00 - at the door \$25.00

Raffle to benefit the Vietnam women's memorial foundation.

Also special guest to be announced.

Call 920-639-2910 to order tickets Or for more information

Please no children under 18 – adult program

Discount rooms \$79 available at Radisson ask for WIVA block 1-800-333-3333

Wisconsin Indian Veterans Association (Oneida Chapter) Breakfast Fundraiser



Wisconsin Indian Veterans Association (Oneida Chapter) - Breakfast Fundraiser - January 25th - 7:00 am – 11:00 am - All you can eat - \$7.00 Adults - Children 10 and under \$4.00

At the new location of Oneida Nation Veterans Building, on Riverdale Dr. 50-50, raffle, come on over for breakfast and visit, or Just Hang Out and Visit. The location is where the Senior Multi-Purpose Center Used to Be. Come out and check out the New Oneida Veterans Building. For delivery orders 2 or more call 530-5645

Gift to Korean War Veterans – Free Commemorative Book Now Available



To commemorate the 60th Anniversary of the Korean War, the Wisconsin Departments of Military Affairs and Veterans Affairs are partnering to distribute a special book to those veterans who served in that conflict. "Korea Reborn: A Grateful Nation Honors War Veterans for 60 Years of Growth" is available for free to Korean War Veterans or family members as a gift of gratitude from the Korean government. The hardbound, full-color, 175-page commemorative is provided to honor these great veterans and their families for their service and sacrifice.

The Korean War began in June 1950, when the pro-communist North Korean Army invaded South Korea. American troops entered the war as part of the United Nations forces defending South Korea. Nearly 1.8 million Americans served in Korea from 1950 to 1953, and over 36,000 were killed. More than 132,000 men and women from Wisconsin served in the war. Today, there are over 40,000 Korean War veterans living in Wisconsin.

The book was published in Salt Lake City and was paid for by the South Korean public and private sectors. The free book is available to be picked up at the following locations:

- County Veteran Service Offices
- WI Veterans Museum on the Capitol Square in Madison
- WI Department of Military Affairs, 2400 Wright Street, Madison
- Also various veteran service organizations and the Wisconsin Korean War Veteran Association will have copies available.

[Request the book online \(http://dma.wi.gov/dma/dma/bookRequest.asp\)](http://dma.wi.gov/dma/dma/bookRequest.asp) or call [608-242-3239](tel:608-242-3239). The book is available one per veteran or family.

Southern Plains Region (TX, OK, KS)

VetFran Hosting Free Veterans Franchise Seminar in Houston, TX



Have you ever considered going into business with a franchise? If so, here's some information on how to do so.

“Greetings! [VetFran](#) is inviting you to a FREE VetFran Panel during the Franchise EXPO South. Veterans and military spouses will also have the opportunity to talk with 100's of franchise brands about what it takes to be a franchisee and how they can support you. Please share with any veteran or military spouse that may be interested.

Location: Reliant Center, Room 305 Houston Texas

Date: Feb. 8, 2014

Time - 10:00 AM - 11 AM

[Click Here and Enter the FREE PROMO Code: VETGPA](#)

You are always welcomed to log onto [vetfran.com](#) and go to the [VetFran ToolKit](#) to learn more about how VetFran can help you become a franchisee. There are also some pretty awesome veteran franchisee stories on the website. We have over 600 VetFran companies offering special programs to veterans and military spouses. Feel free to search by industry in the [VetFran Directory](#).

As a recent veteran myself, and aspiring franchisee I am always here to help and support your journey in becoming a small business owner. I truly believe in the franchise model and what we do here at VetFran. We hope to see you in

Houston! Best, Kevin Blanchard, Project Coordinator,

Research & Strategic Initiatives

International Franchise Association - kblanchard@franchise.org”



Native American Veterans Benefit Enrollment Fair



When: February 21, 2014 ~ 0900-1500

Where: Holdenville Creek Indian Community Center, 224 E. Poplar St., Holdenville, OK

Meals: Snacks and drinks at 0900/Lunch at 1200

Hosts: Seminole Nation of Oklahoma, Muskogee (Creek) nation, VA's Office of Tribal Government Relations, Oklahoma City VAMC, Jack C. Montgomery VAMC



Brink a copy of your DD-214!

Attending Representatives

- Veterans Health Administration
- Veterans Benefits Administration
 - Oklahoma Veterans Center
 - Tulsa Veterans Center
 - Tribal Court Programs
- Veterans Upward Bound Program
- Oklahoma Health Care Authority
 - Tricare/Humana
 - Workforce Oklahoma
 - Office of Special Trustee
 - ODMHSAS
- Tribal training, health care services, and housing services

Transportation will be provided by the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma - for more information, call 405-303-2683. For more information on the event itself, contact Mary Culley (405-456-3876); Candy Klumpp (405-456-3808); Frank Sewell (405-919-9094); Sarai Geary (918-841-3855)

OTGR Tribal Government Relations Specialist Honored by Comanche Indian Veterans Association



On January 2, OTGR's very own Mary Culley was honored by the Comanche Indian Veterans Association (CIVA) and their Mother Warrior Society for her work with their veterans. During the ceremony, Mary was awarded their CIVA Medal for Honorable Memorable Service and was also made an Honorary Comanche Veteran. She was then presented with their CIVA coin for Duty and Honor – something only given to members of their Comanche Veterans Society.

We're proud of you, Mary!



Western Region (AK, WA, OR, CA, ID, NV)

Fit But Not Forgotten Program ~ Reno, NV



The City of Reno is proud to offer our disabled veterans weekly fitness classes in our facility weight room. Classes will cover orientation to equipment, assessment of fitness level, proper technique to develop strength, endurance and flexibility, and discuss fitness goals. Upon completion of four classes participants will be eligible for a FREE all inclusive facility membership good for one year.

Classes at the Evelyn Mount Northeast Community Center -1301 Valley Rd. Reno NV. 89512. For more information: April Wolfe - 775-333-7765
wolfea@reno.gov



VetsLegal Corps ~ Free Legal Service to Californian Veterans

The Justice Bus Project at OneJustice provides free legal support for low-income Californians, including veterans, living in rural and isolated communities throughout the state. The Justice Bus Project takes teams of attorney or law student volunteers to rural and isolated communities in California and provides either one or two-day long free legal clinics on a wide range of legal issues. The legal issues the Justice bus Project addresses includes but is not limited to:

- expungement of criminal records
- consumer debt
- identity theft
- seniors' assistance (advance health care directives, power of attorney, simple wills)
- housing (landlord-tenant / foreclosure)
- employment law matters
- child support and others

Check out the [Justice Bus Video](#) [3:48] here.



Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs Hosts Women Veterans Conference in Eugene, OR on March 28/29, 2014

The conference is being hosted for all women who served in the military. There is no cost to attend and free lunch will be provided. It will take place at the Eugene Hilton in Eugene, Oregon. Pre-registration is required. Come and enjoy two full days of education, entertainment, camaraderie, shopping and more with your fellow women veterans. For more details as they come available, check the website:

<http://www.oregon.gov/ODVA/Pages/WOMENVET.aspx> or call Renee French at 503-373-2085 option #4



Disabled Sports USA (Far West) Opens Ten Spaces for Military Adaptive Ski and Snowboard Camp at Lake Tahoe, NV

See the note from Cindy Smith, Administrative Director of Disabled Sports USA Far West: “Greetings from the Tahoe chapter of Disabled Sports USA - Paralympic Sport Club Lake Tahoe!

Good news! Ten spaces have opened up at the Disabled Sports Military Adaptive Ski and Snowboard Camp in Tahoe March 31-April 9, 2014!!

This FREE camp is 4 days of adaptive ski and snowboard instruction at 3 different Lake Tahoe resorts. Accommodations are at the beautiful Hyatt Regency Lake Tahoe. All transportation, lodging, meals and activities are paid for by our generous donors.

Please read and share the attached invitation and flyer for more information. If you are interested in applying for the camp, complete the application form and return by email or fax. You can also mail the form to PO Box 8339, Truckee, CA 96162

If you have any questions about the camp, please call me at the number below Tues-Sat, 8am-5pm. Best regards, **Cindy Smith**, Administrative Director, Disabled Sports USA Far West - T: 530.581.4161x202 - F: 530.581.3127

www.disabledsports.net



Changes for Tribal Veteran Representatives in Washington State

Lucky Joe Boyd, former TVR for Suquamish Tribe is now the TVR for the **Confederated Tribes of Colville Reservation**. A Veteran himself and enrolled member of the Colville Reservation, Lucky Joe has a long and distinguished career helping Veterans in Indian Country. He is considered by many the most 'seasoned' TVR across the Nation. OTGR wants to congratulate him and we know he will do great things for the Veterans of the Colville Reservation, as well as, all Veterans in that area. He can be reached at luckyjoe.boyd@colvilletribes.com and phone: 509-634-2755.

LaVada Anderson was selected as TVR to replace Lucky Joe for the **Suquamish Tribe**. She is no stranger either to helping Veterans and has been serving Veterans in Indian Country for many years. OTGR wants to congratulate her in this new role and we know she will also do well following the good work that Lucky Joe started. She can be reached at landerson@suquamish.nsn.us and phone: 360-394-8515.

Southwest Region (UT, AZ, CO, NM)



8th Annual Salt River Veterans Recognition Pow-Wow

"Celebrating Tradition, Honoring Service"
April 11-13, 2014

Piipaash Chiyer (Bird) Social/Contests – Friday Evening - Parade – Saturday
Morning, Pow-Wow Saturday and Sunday

Salt River Ballfield ~ Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, AZ.
N.E. Corner of Longmore and McDowell Roads.

All Active Duty, National Guard, Reserve Personnel, Families of Veterans, Veterans Organizations, Veterans and those that support Veterans are welcome to participate and/or attend. Pow-Wow info. email Pacer at edward.reina@srpmic.nsn.gov. Parade info. contact Red Mtn Riders at RedMountainRiders@yahoo.com



Veterans Serving Veterans: Group Offers Support Therapy for Returning Vets

Here's an article by Mikhail Sundust that appeared in the Gila River Indian News. It was published online on January 6th and can be accessed by clicking [HERE](#).

What can the Community do to better serve its veterans? What services do they think are lacking? That's what a local group, spearheaded by an ex-Marine, is asking Gila River veterans directly. They're also reaching out to the family members of veterans, thinking, in some cases, they may be more likely to respond.

One part advocacy group, one part equine therapy group, Veterans Serving Veterans holds breakfast meetings on Saturday mornings. "We want it to be casual. We want it to be engaging," said group founder Andy Miritello. "We try to get away from that idea of just creating another group of people [having] a meeting."

Miritello is a combat veteran. Despite his college deferment, he volunteered for the Marine Corps in the midst of the Vietnam War in 1968. He was 18. Miritello has been working for the Community for the past 15 years as the building trades instructor in the Employment & Training Department. Easily recognizable in his ever-present cowboy hat, boots, ponytail and vest, the 64-year-old cowboy from upstate New York is probably best known for the counseling work he facilitates with his various equine therapy classes, serving at-risk youth on the reservation.

Working with horses is way of reconnecting and building trust, he said. Kahvyoo Spirit, one of his classes, "is a strategy...used for creating well-being within individuals, developing leadership [and] providing improved positive self-esteem with self, peers and community." In the past few years, Miritello's office experienced a high volume of traffic from veterans of the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He realized that a lot of combat veterans could benefit from a similar method of equine therapy.

"I was doing the behavioral health prevention program for kids," Miritello said. He figured, "It's no different for this group. Their experiences have been different but they still suffer the fact that they're not connected with those things that are meaningful in their life. A lot of them come back [from war] and they disconnect themselves."

Veterans Serving Veterans was born to serve this need. "I basically wanted to serve veterans, particularly the younger ones," he said. "The approach is a little bit different (from the work he does with the Community youth)...but they're still building strategies and you're still developing [connections] in order to enforce

their own individual strengths.” During the sessions, a licensed therapist is on hand.

Miritello connected with Michael Rhinehart, who works in substance abuse and suicide prevention for Gila River Health Care’s Behavioral Health Prevention Program. “When the Vets Serving Vets came out,” Rhinehart said, “we decided, ‘Well it’s all prevention, we’re all in collaboration together, so why not support that?’” Rhinehart says his boss has made it a priority to help with VSV program. Priscilla Foote is the Behavioral Health Director at GRHC. She’s “humble and involved” in all the programs her department works with.

Foote also happens to be the daughter of Urban Giff, a prominent elder veteran who helped organize the VSV group and was a great morale booster for its participants and leaders. He brings a connection to the traditional O’odham warriors that few others could, Rhinehart said. At a recent breakfast meeting, Giff told the members about how the O’odham used to have healing ceremonies to integrate warriors back into the community.

Veterans Serving Veterans is currently seeking out young leaders among Gila River veterans to foster and sustain the community. “Joey Whitman from Blackwater [is] an excellent example of a young person that has stepped out of his comfort zone to help provide services for veterans his age,” Miritello said.

VSV has become a collaboration between Miritello and Rhinehart. Both of their employers have backed the program in their own ways. BHPP pays for the breakfasts and E&T provides the meeting space. The duo seeks to create a community of veterans and veterans’ relatives that can openly discuss issues and make a plan to take action on them. “Nobody wants to go to another meeting [and] just talk about things that aren’t happening,” Miritello emphasized. “They want to [talk about the issues] and then provide the strategy to make it happen.”

Housing, mental health and promoting a hiring preference for veterans are the top concerns for Gila River veterans. Rhinehart and Miritello are optimistic. “I think times have changed,” Miritello said. “We’re trying to instill a lot more respect, nationally, for our returning veterans than we did during Vietnam.”

Miritello went 35 years without seeking help for the effects war took on him and wants to help others young veterans avoid living with the substance abuse and paranoia commonly associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, PTSD. “I’ve reached out to ask, ‘How can I help others?’ ... That’s my therapy,” he said.

The next breakfast/meeting is Jan. 25 at 9:00AM on the lawn outside the Employment & Training office. Call Andy Miritello at 480-250-6284 for more information on Veterans Serving Veterans.