

Advisory committee meets in Grand Ronde

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

The plights affecting Oregon veterans — from homelessness to high rates of suicide to having a national cemetery in which to be buried — dominated the nine-member Governor's Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee meeting held Dec. 2 at the Grand Ronde Community Center.

The committee, chaired by Tribal Elder and Vietnam-era Navy veteran Gene LaBonte, met in Grand Ronde for the first time ever in an attempt to make its meetings more convenient for Oregon veterans who cannot always travel to Salem.

The Grand Ronde meeting was attended by the committee's nine members, Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs staff, Grand Ronde Tribal Council Vice Chair Reyn Leno (a Vietnam-era Marine Corps veteran) and about 15 veterans and their spouses, including Tribal Elder and Army veteran Rick McKnight.

"This is great," Leno said about the committee traveling to Grand Ronde and using Tribal facilities. "We, as a Tribe, really open our doors for anything to do with veterans. It's true here in Grand Ronde and in the rest of Indian Country."

Tribal Lands Manager Jan Michael Looking Wolf Reibach, 2009 Artist of the Year at the Native American Music Awards, played taps on Native flute in honor of those who lost their lives recently at the Fort Hood, Texas, shooting.

Addressing the committee first was Edward Smith, outreach coordinator with Oregon Recovery Homes, which runs 169 houses across Oregon and serves about 1,400 clients.

The homes, Smith said, are like family housing that serves homeless people, those recently paroled or put on probation and veterans.

"The veterans who come into our houses provide stability and a level of maturity," Smith said.

Residents pay an average of \$375 per month for rent and then are responsible for anything else, such as food.

Smith said the number of veterans residing in Oregon Recovery Homes has increased 4.8 percent in 2009.

"We're looking to open housing specific to veterans," he added.

Smith was followed by Leslie Storm and Debbie Zwetchkenbaum from Oregon Partnership, which runs crisis telephone lines for alcohol and drug referrals, as well as suicide lines for teenagers, Spanish-speaking Oregonians and veterans.

Storm, the Crises Lines director, said the suicide crisis line is staffed 24/7, 365 days a year by about 100 volunteers who receive 16 hours of "intense" training before being allowed to take calls.

The veterans' suicide line is part of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline based in upstate New York, Storm said. If an Oregon veteran calls 1-800-273-8255 (TALK) and presses 1, they are transferred to counselors trained to deal with



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Tribal Elder Gene LaBonte, left, and Jim Willis, director of the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs, listen to Leslie Storm talk about the crisis line program during the Governors' Advisory Committee to the Director of Veterans' Affairs quarterly meeting in the Tribal Community Center on Wednesday, Dec. 2. LaBonte is the chair of the committee.

veteran-related mental health issues.

Storm said the line has received more than 1,000 calls since April.

An audience member asked why being a veteran puts people more at-risk of committing suicide, citing statistics that suicide is the No. 1 cause of death for veterans 18 to 25 years of age and the No. 2 cause of death for veterans 25 to 44 years of age. More than 1,000 Oregon veterans have committed suicide between 2000 and 2006.

Storm said it can be many issues, or a combination thereof, such as post-traumatic stress syndrome, depression and lack of emotional and financial support.

"Too many of our soldiers and veterans, given the nature of injuries in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and the strain of long and repeated deployments, face an array of challenges. ... Indeed, the rate of suicide among soldiers and veterans is on the rise, a situation that represents a major public health crisis," says the Oregon Partnership Web site.

Zwetchkenbaum, the Crisis Lines assistant director, added that another contributing factor is that veterans tend to have firearms and have a comfort level with using them.

"Veterans should call that line if they are suicidal," Zwetchkenbaum said. "It's confidential and anonymous. Sometimes veterans don't want to self-identify themselves or admit they need help."

Advisory Committee member David Fairclo, an Air Force veteran from the Vietnam and Persian Gulf wars, asked if Oregon Partnership is comfortable handling calls from veterans not living in the Portland area.

Zwetchkenbaum said that the organization is compiling a statewide database of resources that can

assist troubled veterans.

"We are about 50 percent of where we want to be," she said, but added the organization has already helped out-of-area veterans contact resources to help them.

"As long as a suicidal veteran is talking, there is hope," said Jim Willis, director of the state Department of Veterans' Affairs. "I was very impressed with the crisis line."

The Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee unanimously voted to write a letter to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, asking it to create a direct phone line link at its Oregon-based offices in Portland, White City and Roseburg to the Oregon Partnership crisis line.

Willis then delivered his report, beginning with news that the plan to create a second veterans' cemetery in Oregon is continuing.

Willamette National Cemetery in Portland was scheduled to run out of space in 2015, but it recently acquired more acreage, Willis said, extending its lifespan at least 15 more years.

Another 400 acres is being scouted in the central Willamette Valley for a second veterans' cemetery and hopefully there will be a seamless transition from using Willamette National to the new cemetery.

Willis also reported that he met with two state representatives about locating a second Oregon veterans' home along the Interstate 5 corridor south of Salem. The only veterans' home in the state is in The Dalles and was home to 135 veterans in October for a 92 percent occupancy rate.

Willis said a request for proposals will go out in January, a review committee will be formed to make a site selection in May and then the project will move up on the federal

Veterans Affairs priority list.

"We need 35 percent matching funds for this \$40 million project," Willis said. "Hopefully in 2011 we'll be moving dirt."

Willis also reported that he met with Washington Department of Veterans' Affairs officials and representatives from Umpqua Bank about the Veterans Family Fund.

Umpqua Bank will allow people to buy certificates of deposit, beginning at \$100 in value, and half of the interest earned will go to the Veterans Family Fund.

Willis said the fundraising effort has proven successful in Washington state.

Other members of the Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee are Vice Chair Joseph Howell, an Army veteran from Operation Iraqi Freedom; Secretary Gerard Lorang, an Army veteran from the Vietnam era; Irv Fletcher, an Army veteran who served in the Korean War; Tino Ornelas, a Navy veteran from the Vietnam War; Kevin Owens, who served in the Coast Guard in Panama, Grenada and the Persian Gulf; Charles Schmidt, an Air Force veteran from Vietnam and the Persian Gulf wars; and Nanci Visser, a Marine Corps Reserve veteran from the Persian Gulf wars.

After receiving division and subcommittee reports, the Advisory Committee enjoyed a lunch of clam chowder and venison stew cooked by LaBonte's wife, Billie.

"Billie cooked really well," Gene said. "Everybody had seconds and I had thirds."

"It was a great meeting," Willis said. "We got a lot of work done and we had great interest from the veterans in the audience. The Tribe was a wonderful host."

The Advisory Committee meets on a quarterly basis and will reconvene March 10 in Salem. ■