

# VA holds Tribal Government Relations event

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Office of Tribal Government Relations held its second Western Region Conference at Spirit Mountain Casino on Tuesday and Wednesday, July 10-11.

Helping coordinate the conference on the Grand Ronde end was Member Services Specialist Reina Nelson, who said that the goal of the conference was "creating awareness to Tribal veterans and facilitators of the programs available from all four legs of Veterans Affairs." Those legs are: Veterans Benefits Administration, National Cemetery Administration, VA Health Care and Veterans Housing Administration.

Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs Director Jim Willis put the goal of the conference another way: "To collaborate, educate and network to serve this population."

In welcoming the crowd that came from the Western Region's six states of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Nevada, California and Alaska, Grand Ronde Vice Chairman Reyn Leno, a Vietnam War-era Marine veteran, said, "One of the biggest things, I always have to think, is for veterans to tell you their needs. They won't tell you until they need it bad. (Overcoming that resistance) will be your hardest job."

Michelle Cooper, a Tribal member and Iraq veteran living in Corvallis, came "to learn about benefits and what's available" in terms of vocational rehabilitation, housing, mental health and other services.

"I think the VA is really complicated to the average veteran," she said. "A lot of vets don't have any clue what's available to them."

For Louis Bickford, an Ojibwe veteran from California, the two government-to-government conferences held so far have been "invaluable," he said.

"It brings together all the resources we need; more than just VA compensation pension and health care, but also Social Security SAMSHA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration), and county and state programs." Bickford is founder and volunteer director of the National First Na-



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

**Tribal Vice Chair Reyn Leno gives a welcome speech at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Office of Tribal Government Relations second Western Region Conference at Spirit Mountain Casino on Tuesday, July 10.**

tions Veteran Service Organization.

The two-day program included workshops on many veteran issues, including disability, success stories, health care and homelessness, as well as a session on understanding American Indian worldviews.

Led by Seattle Indian Health

Board's Annette Squetimkin-Anquo, a Colville Indian who leads the Washington Urban Indian Tobacco Prevention and Control Coalition, the session described "what it means for us to be in balance, in health and able to heal."

Also in attendance was Mark Johnston, director of the Tribe's

Health & Wellness Clinic, who was on hand because "the Tribe and the local VA have been working on an agreement for three months," he said. "The agreement is part of the Affordable Care Act requiring the VA to negotiate agreements with Tribes to reimburse them for health care services provided at Tribal clinics for eligible veterans. Ultimately, the agreement should create better access to health care services to all eligible veterans and provide added revenues for the CTGR Health and Wellness Center that can be used to enhance the health care services we provide."

The concept of the Veterans Affairs' Office of Tribal Government Relations began with an executive order in 2000 from President Bill Clinton, but the office did not exist until the Obama administration ordered it in 2009.

Posting the colors was a Grand Ronde Honor Guard, including Tribal Elder Gene LaBonte, LaBonte's cousin Ronda Metcalf, who is a project director for the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board, and veterans Bob Duncan and Al Miller.

"It just isn't a matter of honoring vets one day," said Leno. "We have to honor them every day." ■



**Clockwise from left, Tribal Elder Wink Soderberg, Reina Nelson, Tribal Member Services specialist, and Michelle Cooper attended the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Office of Tribal Government Relations second Western Region Conference at Spirit Mountain Casino on Tuesday, July 10. Also in attendance was Tribal Vice Chair Reyn Leno, front. Soderberg, Cooper and Leno are veterans and Nelson helped coordinate the conference.**

## Lamprey harvest lasts until July 31

Are you an enrolled Tribal member interested in harvesting lamprey for personal use? The state Department of Fish and Wildlife has announced the 2012 harvesting schedule for lamprey on the east side of Willamette Falls. Enrolled Tribal members may harvest lamprey for their personal use between June 1 and July 31, 2012, while following established guidelines. Contact the Natural Resources Department at 47010 S.W. Hebo Road in Grand Ronde or call 503-879-2424 for more information and specifics. ■

## Youth Center seeks volunteers

The Tina Miller Community Center Thrift Store, 110 B. St., Willamina, which helps fund the after-school and weekend youth community center located in the old high school gym, is seeking volunteers who can help run the store, in addition to donated items and customers. The store accepts clothes, books, knickknacks, etc., as donations. It is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and closed on Sunday and Monday. Donations also can be left at the Wildwood Hotel and Restaurant in Willamina. For more information on volunteering, call 503-876-7897. The youth center and thrift store that funds it are nonprofit and 100 percent self-sustaining and volunteer-run. ■

## Bernando teaches Wawa in Portland

Tribal member Eric Bernando teaches weekly Chinuk Wawa language classes from 5:30 to 8:20 p.m. Wednesdays at the Portland office, 4445 S.W. Barbur Blvd., Suite 101.

For more information, contact Bernando at ChinukWawa@gmail.com or at 503-709-3017. ■

## Transportation to Grand Ronde for Tribal members

The Portland Office has transportation day to Grand Ronde once a month for medical, dental appointments or enrollment cards. We need a minimum of 3 people to sign up. Please call Lisa

503-235-4230

We will leave at the Portland Office at 8 a.m.

Please call in advance for the scheduled monthly date



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