

'Negotiating the MOU was real simple'

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federated Tribes of Grand Ronde held a pre-summit workshop on Thursday, July 9, in the Tribal Community Center to brief other Pacific Northwest Tribes on its agreement with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs that allows it to serve Native veterans through the Tribal health clinic.

Health care for Native veterans living in rural areas or in areas of the country without a Veterans Affairs hospital is problematic at best. Native veterans are three times more likely to live in highly rural areas than nonNative veterans, and aging Native veterans can find it difficult to travel long distances to reach a Veterans Affairs health care facility.

By allowing Tribal clinics to provide health care to Native veterans, as well as be reimbursed for that care through the Department of Veterans Affairs, Tribes can help Native veterans living in rural areas who cannot access or travel to the Veterans Affairs facilities in Portland and the Tribes can save limited Indian Health Service funding to care for other members.

Mark Johnston, former head of the Grand Ronde Health & Wellness Center and current deputy executive director of the Coquille Tribe, returned to discuss veterans' health care.

"Negotiating the MOU was real simple," Johnston told an audience of about 30 people. "The harder part is getting Native veterans signed up with the VA."

Johnston said the Department of Veterans Affairs protected sovereign immunity in negotiating the memorandum of understanding and reimburses Tribes for Native veterans' health care at a high rate.

"Native veterans don't have to leave the Reservation," Johnston said. "They can see the providers they are used to seeing."

"The big question," Johnston said, "is where do Oregon Tribes go from here?" He said he would like to see the process of qualifying Native veterans for VA-approved health care streamlined, possibly allowing Tribes to decide who is eligible for VA-reimbursable care.

Also, Johnston said Veterans Affairs needs to help Tribes figure out how to serve nonNative veterans who live in the community as either spouses or residents, but also face the same logistical problems of accessing health care.

"I think that is one of the next logical steps that will require talking to legislators," Johnston said.

In addition, Johnson said Tribes will need to talk to their federal representatives about more funding for the VA to treat veterans – Native and nonNative alike.

Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno said the idea of the Tribal health clinic serving Native veterans was inspired by the Grand Ronde Tribes' desire to serve its World War II veterans, who were unable or unwilling to make the journey to Portland.



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno gives a welcome at the start of the Native Veterans Summit at Uyxat Powwow Grounds on Friday, July 10. In the background is Tribal Council member Tonya Gleason-Shepek, left, and Tribal Council Vice Chair Jack Giffen Jr.

Leno said the MOU saves the Tribe Indian Health Service funds, which are then used to serve the rest of the membership.

"We are still working on being able to see any veteran," Leno said.

Terry Bentley, Western Region Tribal Government Relations specialist with the Department of Veterans Affairs, said the VA currently has 79 reimbursement agreements with Tribes nationwide that reimburse direct care services for VA enrolled and eligible Native veterans.

She added that the agreements have reimbursed more than \$22.6

million to Tribes for the care of more than 5,400 Native veterans.

Bentley distributed a packet to help any interested Tribe contact the VA about establishing a memorandum of understanding regarding Native veterans' health care.

The workshop also was attended by Social Services Manager David Fullerton, who moderated the

event, and General Manager Dawn Doar.

The workshop was followed by a reception and dinner at the Powwow Grounds and cultural sharing at achaf-hammi, the Tribal plankhouse.

Summit begins

The official summit kicked off a little after 9 a.m. Friday at the Powwow Grounds with the theme of "Honoring Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans," warriors of America's two most recent conflicts.

The Grand Ronde Honor Guard posted the colors and included Tribal Elders Alton Butler (eagle staff), Raymond Petite (Grand Ronde flag) and Brenda Tuomi (U.S. flag) as Grand Ronde drummers Bobby Mercier, Brian Krehbiel and Travis Stewart sang.

Elder Edmund Bull (Little Pine First Nation) gave the blessing and Grand Ronde Tribal Council member Jon A. George gave the invocation.

Morning speakers introduced by master of ceremonies and Navy veteran Nick Sixkiller included a welcome from Grand Ronde Tribal Chairman Reyn Leno, a Marine Corps veteran of the Vietnam War era, as well as speeches from JoAnne Krumberger, director of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Portland Health Care System, and Terry Bentley (Karuk), Tribal Government Relations specialist for the Western Region with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Leno introduced Tribal Council members in attendance – George, Vice Chair Jack Giffen Jr., Tonya Gleason-Shepek and Ed Pearsall. He then complimented Tribal staff on the new arbor, which he said was one of the few things that all nine members of Tribal Council agreed on.

"When all nine members of Tribal Council agree on something, you might want to take action and do it," Leno said. "It's a beautiful arbor."

Leno said the summit and powwow are his favorite events of the year because they recognize veterans.

"We wouldn't get to do things like this if it wasn't for our veterans," Leno said. "I've always said if you can just help one veteran we're successful. Numbers never bothered me. If you can help one veteran step up, because veterans are really tough, and go get their services and benefits."

Leno also acknowledged his cousin, Thomas Elery Leno, who walked on Dec. 31, 2014, and became a statistic of Agent Orange. "It's important that we get veterans to use their benefits, get their families

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Terry Bentley, Tribal Government Relations specialist for the Western Region with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, speaks during the Native Veterans Summit at Uyxat Powwow Grounds on Friday, July 10.

