

Millions of Native Americans rely on welfare programs

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Merkley did not hesitate to criticize the effort following his Friday, May 4, meeting with Tribal Council.

“When it comes to the Trump administration, it starts from a place where my assumption is it is probably a bad idea,” Merkley said. “And since it regards undermining Tribal sovereignty, I’m certain that it is a bad idea.”

Merkley was one of 10 U.S. Senators who signed an April 27 letter to Department of Health & Human Services Secretary Alex Azar expressing concerns about a Jan. 17 “Dear Tribal Leader” letter that said the federal agency is unable to require states to exempt American Indians and Alaska Natives from work and community engagement requirements because it is “constrained by statute.”

“The views expressed fail to recognize the unique legal status of Indian Tribes and their members under federal law, the U.S. Constitution, treaties and federal trust relationship,” the letter states.

Nationwide, Tribal leaders have been seeking an exemption from new Medicaid work rules being introduced in several states, but Trump administration officials in the Health & Human Services Department contend that Tribes are a race rather than separate governments. They contend that exempting Tribal members from Medicaid work rules would be illegal preferential treatment.

The website Politico reported in April that the new ruling was driven by political appointees in the general counsel and civil rights offices at Health & Human Services.

Tribes insist that any claim of “racial preference” is moot because they’re constitutionally protected as separate governments, dating back to treaties signed by President George Washington and reaffirmed under Republican and Democratic

presidents alike. “The United States has a legal responsibility to provide health care to Native Americans,” said Mary Smith, acting head of the Indian Health Service during the Obama administration and a member of the Cherokee Nation. “It’s the largest prepaid health system in the world – they’ve paid through land and massacres – and now you’re going to take away health care and add a work requirement?”

Tribal leaders and public health advocates also worry that Medicaid work rules are just the start. Trump is eyeing similar changes for the nation’s welfare programs, which almost 3 million Native Americans rely on.

The Trump administration’s early relationship with Native American Tribes has been less than friendly. Trump stopped holding the annual White House Tribal Nations Conference instituted by the Obama administration and held annually. He has also proposed significant cuts for the Indian Health Service in last year’s budget, although Congress ignored those cuts in its funding package approved in March.

This year, the White House has proposed eliminating popular initiatives like the community health representative program.

“Work requirements will be devastating,” Smith said. “I don’t know how you would implement it. There are not jobs to be had on the Reservation.”

The letter co-signed by Merkley asked the Department of Health & Human Services to supply information on how the department and Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services reached their conclusion that allowing exemptions for American Indians and Alaska Natives “could raise civil rights concerns.” They have yet to receive a response, Merkley’s state communications director, Sara Hottman, said. ■

Includes information from Politico.com.

Massage at Health & Wellness Center

Mind, Body & Soul Therapeutic Massage started at the Health & Wellness Clinic last year.

Remember: Appointments for massage are not managed by the Health & Wellness Center staff. To schedule an appointment, call 971-237-2561. ■

2018 Community Input Meeting

The Grand Ronde Tribe’s annual Community Input meeting on programs and projects will be held at the Tribal gym on Wednesday, June 13, starting with dinner at 6 p.m. After a brief introduction, the meeting mostly involves visiting open house tables with their posters and photos on programs and projects and providing your comments. Open house tables will include Health and Wellness, Education, Cultural Resources, Housing, Social Services, Police, and several other departments and tables on the community development, transportation and transit plans. The meeting will end with door prizes, including a Pendleton blanket.

This meeting is offered as an opportunity for members to provide comments and suggestions that will help guide Tribal programs and grant applications (i.e. ANA, ICDBG, CCDF, Head Start, CSBG and others). Those unable to attend can submit written comments and suggestions to: Mr. Kim Rogers, Planning & Grants manager, Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, 9615 Grand Ronde Road, Grand Ronde, OR 97347. For additional information, please contact Rogers at 503-879-2250. ■

Kennedy to convene Tribal meeting about Chemawa Indian School fixes

By Dean Rhodes
Smoke Signals editor

Grand Ronde Tribal Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy and Siletz Tribal Chairwoman Dee Pigsley will convene a meeting of Oregon Tribal representatives to compile a list of concerns to be addressed along with possible solutions regarding how Chemawa Indian School in Salem is operated.

The scheduled meeting is a result of a Thursday, May 3, session held in Salem that attracted four members of the Oregon congressional delegation – Sens. Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden and Reps. Suzanne Bonamici and Kurt Schrader.

Leaders from seven Oregon Tribes also attended to express concerns and press school administrators for answers following an Oregon Public Broadcasting series that aired last fall that documented long-standing concerns over student safety, academics, school management and finances.

The group ended up with immediate and long-range plans to reform Chemawa, which is the country’s oldest federally run boarding school for Native American youth. Goals included greater transparency, more Tribal involvement and a potential overhaul of the how the school is governed.

Kennedy, whose father was a vocational teacher and head of maintenance at the school, said that money is high on the list of concerns, along with the lack of Native Americans on the teaching staff.

During the Tuesday, May 8, Legislative Action Committee meeting, Kennedy said Chemawa does not receive enough funding to be a 24/7 residential boarding school.

“None of the programs have sufficient funds ... to do it in a quality way,” Kennedy said.

The list of Tribal concerns will be sent to lawmakers and the Bureau of Indian Education, which operates the school, within a month.

“I believe that most of the Tribes there expressed that the method for selecting faculty seemed to be not very open, because Tribes had talked about they had Tribal members who were teachers who weren’t hired,” Kennedy said.

The meeting included Bureau of Indian Education Director Tony Dearman.

Lawmakers said they want more rigorous financial audits of Chemawa and that they might introduce legislation to increase transparency at the school.

Chemawa is one of four fed-



Cheryle A. Kennedy

eral boarding schools for Native youth still operating in the United States and one of 183 schools overseen by the Bureau of

Indian Education. The largest population of students at Chemawa hail from Arizona.

Reforming Chemawa, however, might be difficult. Under the Trump administration, the Bureau of Indian Affairs has experienced significant turmoil, including the resignation of Director Bryan Rice in April after only six months on the job.

And while Oregon Tribes are taking a renewed interest in the school’s management, the vast majority of students – 92 percent – come from other states, according to the school’s 2014-15 enrollment data.

In addition, reform efforts involving dozens of Tribes might be more than Oregon’s nine Tribes can manage.

“I believe that we’ll look back to the Bureau of Indian Affairs and say that they have a responsibility here themselves,” Kennedy said.

“I thought it was an important conversation,” Merkley said during his Friday, May 4, meeting with the Grand Ronde Tribal Council. “I just thought about what a complex governing system it is because the (Chemawa School) board doesn’t have real power and the board is spread out over a long space, and the contracts that need to go through a big bureaucracy, and whether it might be time to try a significantly different experiment in how to run the school. ... It needs to have the ability to respond more quickly to circumstances.”

“I would say the meeting was somewhat tense to begin with,” Kennedy said. “But, I believe, by the end of the meeting everyone understood that we were all there for the same reason, and that is to supply a good, quality education to Native American students who come there from around the country. ... I want things to be better.”

Also attending the Chemawa meeting was Tribal Council Chief of Staff Stacia Hernandez.

To hear the OPB series about problems at Chemawa Indian School, visit www.opb.org/news/series/chemawa/. ■

Includes information from opb.org.

Name changes in court

Tribal Court provides both minor and adult name changes to enrolled members for a filing fee of only \$30. If you have any questions or would like to request a packet, contact Tribal Court at 503-879-2303. ■