

## Appendix G: Native American Committee White Paper

### Introduction

Of all the sub-groups receiving care at the Hot Springs Veterans Administration Medical Center (HS VAMC), the Native American veterans residing on the nine Indian reservations of South Dakota will certainly be the most adversely affected. In meeting after meeting on the Pine Ridge Reservation, Native American veterans have vehemently expressed dismay and opposition over the proposed closure of the Hot Springs VA facility. The following report reviews some of the special concerns and considerations of the local Native American population.

### Tradition

History, tradition and trust are important factors in the lives of Native American people. It takes time to build a relationship between two groups of people who share a long history of confrontation and suspicion, but during the last hundred years our Native American veterans have gradually come to place their trust with the doctors, nurses and other employees of the Hot Springs VAMC. Ties like these have not necessarily occurred at VA facilities in other areas, where Native Americans say they do not receive the same degree of respect and acceptance.

Additionally, Hot Springs (*minnekahta* in the Lakota language) has long been venerated by the indigenous people as a sacred healing site. In 1869, Lakota and Cheyenne warriors fought a fierce battle for possession of the source of the "healing waters" from which Hot Springs draws its name. Over the decades since 1907, the VAMC and its surrounding community have achieved renown for the welcoming, nurturing spirit extended to the many thousands of veterans, including Native American *akichita*, who have come to be healed atop Battle Mountain.

### Historically Strong Representation in the Military

Among indigenous American tribes, few can claim equal status with the Lakota as a warrior culture. For hundreds of years, young men--and even young women--have honed their skills in the art of war and have prided themselves in defending their people and way of life. In all America's wars of the past 100 years, the Native American population has contributed in disproportionately high numbers to the American military. Nine Indian reservations in the state of South Dakota boast significant numbers of resident veterans. Not all are registered, but Veteran Service Officers from just four of those reservations have offered the following numbers:

Pine Ridge	3,969
Rosebud	750
Cheyenne River	1,247
Standing Rock	1,200
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TOTAL:	7,166

Those figures undoubtedly will increase dramatically with the return of veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Many of those returning have not yet begun to utilize the Hot Springs facility because their medical and mental/emotional problems have yet to surface to the point of causing them to seek help. It should be noted that most Native Americans enter the service as enlistees rather than as officers, and so are more likely to see combat, resulting in a significant incidence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder diagnoses.

The Plains Indian culture places high priority on respect, honor and trust. As a proud people with deep traditions, the Lakota value the respect accorded them in Hot Springs, and fear they will lose this quality of treatment with closure of the VAMC in Hot Springs. Over and over, Native Americans report they do not receive the same level of treatment in Rapid City or Ft. Meade, and they emphatically state they do not want to go to those facilities or to the Indian Health Services (IHS) hospitals.

### Special Needs for Native Veterans

Since the establishment of reservations for indigenous peoples, Native Americans have struggled with a range of addictions, exacerbated by high unemployment and PTSD for returning veterans. Three of the poorest counties in the United States are located on South Dakota Indian reservations. Although at least one of the reservations (Pine Ridge) is dry, illicit drugs and alcohol are available. The town of White Clay, Nebraska, located within walking distance (two miles) from the town of Pine Ridge and supporting a population of ten residents, sells approximately five million cans of beer per year, virtually all destined to be consumed by Native Americans from the reservation.

Conditions on the reservations can be severe, with below-standard housing, sub-zero winters, high rates of unemployment, suicide and domestic violence, and the highest rates of infant mortality in the nation, all working to place returning veterans in at-risk situations for drug and

alcohol use. Even veterans who recognize a problem and seek treatment often have difficulty maintaining sobriety when they return to homes where they may be surrounded by family and community members who continue to drink and use drugs.

Honor and pride are important to Native Americans, who are often reluctant to seek help or to appear weak. Cultural sensitivity is a high priority for the Hot Springs VAMC, which has designed an excellent PTSD program around the cultural values of honor, pride, respect and dignity. The Hot Springs facility was the first in the nation to offer a sweat lodge (*inipi*), in which Native veterans pray for strength to reconnect with their spiritual values. The sweat lodge has been an active part of the Hot Springs facility for 20 years, with some 10,000 documented veterans, both native and non-native from all across the United States, taking part in the ceremonies.

### Lack of Health Care Facilities on the Reservation

In his proposal of December 12, Stephen DiStasio suggested that veterans services could become community-based through Indian Health Services (IHS), which is not a comparable system and which is already overwhelmed. Many IHS doctors take a two-year assignment at IHS hospitals to work off their student loans, and a common sentiment of Native American veterans is, "We don't want to go to the IHS so that young and inexperienced doctors can practice on us. We aren't guinea pigs."

In a speech before the National Congress of American Indians on March 7, 2012, VA Undersecretary of Health Robert A. Petzel stated:

"Compared to urban veterans, rural and highly-rural veterans have lower health-related quality-of-life scores and a higher prevalence of physical illness. At the same time, rural veterans are less likely to have access to mental and physical health services they desperately need--especially for chronic conditions such as hypertension and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder."

For both addiction and PTSD treatment, the mental health facilities of the VA system are critical. This type of support is nearly non-existent on the reservations, and what is available is not specifically geared to the needs of veterans.

VA Undersecretary of Health Petzel concluded his March 7 speech with the words: "You have my promise that VA will always try to be there for America's native veterans--to care for those who shall have borne the battle."

### Special Advantages of Hot Springs Facility

In contrast with the poor health care support provided on the nine South Dakota reservations, Hot Springs is well known as a caring, supportive community for healing veterans. For over two hundred years, Native Americans have journeyed to their sacred *minnekahta* in the Black Hills

to avail themselves of its healing power.

There appear to be several reasons why Native Americans prefer to utilize the Hot Springs VA Medical Center rather than the Ft. Meade or Rapid City facilities, in part because Hot Springs is closer and more accessible to them. Even in cases where travel distances are not shorter, veterans prefer to travel to Hot Springs, where they feel they receive higher quality care.

Native American veterans from reservations as far away as Lower Brule, Crow Creek, Cheyenne River, Standing Rock, Yankton, and Lake Traverse have expressed a strong preference to receive treatment at the Hot Springs VAMC despite the fact that a round trip to Ft. Meade or Rapid City would involve less total mileage and travel time. There are several reasons for this. Reservation veterans frequently cite an all-too-familiar pattern of harassment towards Native Americans by South Dakota law enforcement officers on the major highways leading into Rapid City. *Akichita* typically complain of being targeted because of physical appearance, the number of occupants in the car, or due to a mal-functioning head or tail light on a "rez car." There is a perception that racial profiling generates a disproportionate number of pullovers against Native Americans, leading to imposition of traffic fines up to \$300 per violation.

In contrast, Native Americans often mention the serenity of Hot Springs, the attraction of its advantageous housing/rental fees for outpatients and their families, as well as the townspeople's reputation for warmly receiving all veterans and honoring their service.

Additional reasons for preferring Hot Springs over Sturgis or Rapid City are the marked absence of vice and distractions for those enrolled in treatment programs for PTSD, mental disorders or substance abuse. Hot Springs offers special advantages for Native American veterans. It is much closer to the reservation, encouraging more frequent visitation from family members. Ft. Meade is twice as far for Pine Ridge Reservation families to travel. Additionally, Native American veterans are less likely to receive harassment from state troopers when traveling closer to home, and have less to worry about a vehicle that might not meet state standards for longer travel.

### Near-Term Planned Tribal Initiatives

The proposed closure of the Hot Springs VAMC has prompted the Veterans Committee of Pine Ridge Reservation to call for a vets convention in April, 2012, to organize and let their voices be heard. As a sovereign nation, the Lakota people will have their chairman and special delegation go to Washington, just as nations from other countries send their ambassadors. They will call on senators and representatives on the Veterans Committee, Indian Affairs, the Department of the Interior and especially Senators John McCain and Daniel Inouye.

## Summary

The history of the United States is inextricably tied to Native American culture, but Native Americans cannot simply be relegated to the annals of history long past. People of the Lakota Nation, long known for their valor and skill on the battlefield, continue to volunteer in record numbers for today's military service. When they return home to their families and reservations, they deserve special consideration for their needs and concerns, which are often unique or severe and cannot be met by other governmental agencies.

Hot Springs has consistently and respectfully provided that care, and the tribe is united in supporting the continuation of that success. To the Lakota, healing needs to be spiritual as well as physical, and they strongly believe that there is no better place for it to take place than in their traditional "healing place" in the sacred *Paha Sapa* (Black Hills). The alternatives (Ft. Meade, Rapid City or the IHS) cannot compete.

History has not been kind to the indigenous people of the plains, but they continue to love this country and to serve loyally in disproportionate numbers in the ranks of the US military. Now our country has a chance to make their lives a bit easier by ensuring continued operation of the Hot Springs VA hospital and Domiciliary. These proud people deserve to be treated with empathy, dignity, respect and honor. Native American veterans are neither guinea pigs nor throw-away people and they should not be forgotten.