ARIZONA AMERICAN INDIAN

VETERANS TOWN HALL AND BENEFITS PRESENTATION

Report



October 12 & 13, 2016 | We-Ko-Pa Resort | Fort McDowell, AZ

REPORT OF THE
30th ARIZONA AMERICAN INDIAN VETERANS TOWN HALL AND BENEFITS PRESENTATION

"Improving the quality of life of American Indian Veterans and their Families"

October 12-13, 2016
Fort McDowell, AZ

Introduction

The Governor's Office on Tribal Relations (GOTR) is proud to offer the Final Report of the 30th Annual Arizona Indian Town Hall (AITH). This annual event hosted by the GOTR was held on October 12-13th, at the WeKoPa Resort in Fort McDowell, Arizona. The report of the AITH reflects the hard work of many participants, including elected and appointed public and tribal officials, policy advisors, community and business leaders, health and education leaders, gathered from throughout Arizona to discuss an especially important topic: *Improving the quality of life of American Indian Veterans and their Families.*

The event kicked off with an evening reception on October 12th at 5:30pm on the WeKoPa Courtyard with a showcase of a Veteran tribute created by Jim Covarrubias (artist) and light refreshments. On October 13th the town hall discussion provided an opportunity for American Indian Veterans of all wars to share powerful and important experiences with the community, to air questions and concerns and encouraged discussion dependent on questions raised by attendees. The dialogue among the speakers aimed to articulate the difference between the Arizona Department of Veteran Services and the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, inform our attendees on programs and resources available through non-government organizations, identify barriers to receiving access to behavioral health services and discuss the correlation between workforce development issues and healthy living. The remainder of the event was geared to present all the tools to access benefits available through the Department of Veterans' Services. Each portion of the event was created with the goal to ensure that all veterans and their dependents left the event with sufficient information to meet immediate needs in mind.

Process

The commencement of the opening session began the Town Hall. Moderator Ms. Patty Talahongva presented Ira H. Hayes Post #84 for the posting of the colors followed by the Pledge of Allegiance by Miss Fort McDowell Katerena McLevain and an invocation by former Fort McDowell President Mr. Raphael Bear. Current Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation President Bernadine Burnette offered the Welcome Address where she graciously welcomed everyone to her homeland. The Keynote Address was provided by the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS), Director Wanda Wright whom is the third generation of her family to serve the U.S. military with three decades of military experience under her belt.

In her keynote address Director Wright explained that for the last three months ADVS has come to know and build relationships with the tribal communities. She took position as director a year and a half ago with the intent to serve veterans throughout Arizona regardless of their culture. She spoke about current projects within ADVS and tribal communities which included President Begaye signing the Navajo Veterans Act in February 2016, both President Begaye and Director Wright signing a memorandum of understanding in June 2016 under which ADVS will train members of the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration to represent Navajo veterans in filing benefits claims with the federal Department of Veterans Affairs, and in September 2016 senior staff from ADVS met with veteran leaders of the Gila River Indian Community to discuss in assisting them in creating an agency within the Gila River Government with the goal of reaching and serving veterans in their community. Also, to form a strong tribal community relationship ADVS hosted the first of five American Indian celebrations throughout the state in August 2016. She hopes that ADVS will continue to build collaborations between tribal nations and the state of Arizona and wants every tribe to know that their department seeks an active partnership with each of the tribal governments to serve all of their veterans.

Thereafter the opening session, the Town Hall discussion immediately followed with the topic *Improving the quality of life of American Indian Veterans and their Families.* Ms. Talahongva encouraged everyone to ask questions and explained that today would be a day where issues will be raised and problems will be solved. She proceeded by asking the panelist speakers to take their seats on stage and briefly introduce themselves and their organization to the audience before questions were posed by attendees.

Thomas Winkel is Director of the Arizona Coalition for Military Families (ACMF). He explained that ACMF was created after hearing the need for help and is a public/private partnership focused on building Arizona's capacity to care for and support all service members, veterans, their families and community. ACMF helps organizations that have veterans within their community and provide high quality, better practice services. A few of their projects include the CARE Project which ensures that service members, veterans and their families receive only the best care and support as well as civilian providers and organizations that want to help have the resources and

information for how to become equipped to support the population. They also have an annual Statewide Symposium and a roadmap to Veteran employment that engages the public and private sector organizations with a goal of connecting service members, veterans and their family members to employment opportunities, training and resources which include roadmap portals and job fair events. ACMF also has a Military/Veteran Resource Navigator Training program that focuses on connecting a service member, veteran or family to resources with currently over 900 trained navigators.

Diana “Dede” Yazzie Devine is CEO/President of Native American Connections (NAC) which is a non-profit organization that has contact with every tribe in the state and helps improve the lives of individuals and families through Native American culturally appropriate behavioral health, affordable/permanent/transitional housing, and community development services. NAC’s services are available to anyone that is Medicaid eligible and include: housing throughout their 700 housing communities most close to the light rail for easy transportation, a pathway to employment, programs for homeless youth up to age 25 and families, and wellness centers that provide residential treatment, traditional healing and wellness checks.

Director Wanda Wright provided a little bit more information on ADVS and explained that they are separate from the Department of Veteran Affairs which is a federal agency while ADVS is a state agency. ADVS oversees three divisions which include administrative services, veterans’ services, and Arizona veteran homes. Within their veterans’ services they provide Veterans Benefits Counselors (VBCs) which is a network of counselors who give information, counseling assistance to veterans, their dependents and survivors in matters pertaining to federal and state benefits earned by honorable service in the armed forces of the U.S. ADVS also has three cemeteries, is a state approving agency who inspect/approve education and training as well as provide help with homelessness, education, employment, minority veteran outreach, housing, and grant funds.

Terry Araman started the Madison Street Veterans Association with a group of veterans living together in a shelter which is the nation’s first homeless veteran service organizations based on the principle of peer support and is currently serving as its Director. The community home was founded with the help of a grant from ADVS six years ago. The programs provided are available to help veterans with issues so that they can make it easier for veterans to move back into life and provide our service members a way of living. Housing at the Mana House (Marines, Army, Navy, and Airforce) opened in 2010 and offered 52 homeless male veterans housing and in 2016 sixteen bed transitional living spaces opened for women veterans. Mr. Araman’s association also provides help with employment through job fair events and classes to help build veterans for work.

After each panelist introduced themselves the moderator encouraged everyone in the room to ask questions on any concerns they may have. Microphones were dispersed throughout the room and members were invited to come up and ask their questions to the panelists. Following the town hall discussion, guests enjoyed lunch and

preceded with the benefits presentations. The benefits presentations included information from a number of presenters from different state agencies.

The first presenter was Mr. Rory Wilson who is an attorney for the Department of Revenue and spoke about the Native American Veterans Income Tax Settlement Fund. The Native American Veterans Income Tax Settlement Fund was created by the Department of Defense (DOD) in response to the Department of Justice issuing a memo in November 2000 stating that all state withholding from Native American military pay while domiciled on their reservation was impermissible. The form DD-2058-2 (Native American State Tax Withholding Exemption Certificate) was made available July 2002 which exempted Native American military members from state income tax withholding provided they were domiciled on their reservation. House Bill 2708 established the Native American Veterans Income Tax Settlement Fund on July 1, 2016 where 2 million is allocated to the fund specifically 1.8 million for claimants.

Mr. Gary Ochoa the Southern Region Manager at ADVS Veterans Services Department was the second presenter and offered information on Service Connect Disability Compensation. Service connected disability compensation is a tax free monthly monetary benefit paid to veterans who are disabled due to an injury or disease that was incurred or aggravated during active military service. The veteran must have also been discharged under conditions that were other than dishonorable. Five ways to claim service connection would be: a direct injury or illness related to service, a pre-existing injury or disease that may have been aggravated by active military, naval or air service, a secondary disability which is proximately due to or the result of a service-connected disease or injury, a presumption which is a disease that may fit into several categories and laws such as tropical diseases, mustard gas, and others, and lastly Section 1151 Claims.

Next up was Mr. David Mosier who is the Northern Regional Manager for ADVS Veterans Services Department and spoke about VA pension and death benefits. Mr. Mosier explained the qualifications for Veterans Pension which was 90 days or more of active military service, at least 1 day during a period of war, discharged under conditions other than dishonorable, permanent and total disability by rating and meets income and net worth guidelines. Death benefits for military families include Dependency Indemnity Compensation (DIC), Parent Dependency Indemnity Compensation, death pension, burial benefits and a presidential memorial certificate.

Then, Mr. David Guerin the Central Regional Manager for ADVS Veterans Services Department spoke on other federal VA benefits. These other benefits included: health care, education, life insurance and home loan guaranty. VA Health Care eligibility describes a person who served in the active military, naval, or air services and was discharged under other than dishonorable conditions. The VA offers five education programs for veterans and their dependents. VA Life Insurance also acknowledges five life insurance programs that have specific eligibility requirements. The VA Home Loan Guaranty offers veterans and eligible surviving dependents to buy or build a home or condo unit, repair, alter or improve a residence owned by the veteran; refinance an

existing home; install a solar heating or cooling system or other energy-efficient improvements.

Lastly, Mr. Bryan Durham, the Community Programs Coordinator, and Ms. Michelle Sullivan, the Military Family Relief Fund and Minority Programs Coordinator, both from ADVS provided information on Arizona benefits for veterans. These benefits through ADVS included the Military and Family Relief Fund, Veterans Donation Fund, Homeless Veteran Program, Women Veteran Programs, hunting and fishing licenses, Veteran license plates and driver's license indicator, tax benefits, employment and state parks.

The presenters' vast number of information was provided to each attendee through handouts so that each person could take the information home for future aid. The audience was able to ask questions to the presenters with any concerns they had so that they could get immediate assistance. The 30th annual American Indian Town Hall concluded with a retiring of the colors by Ira H. Hayes Post#84.

Panel Discussion: Improving the quality of life of American Indian Veterans and their families

Question 1: Are there any homeless veteran programs scheduled in Mesa, AZ?

NAC is a large housing provider with programs for affordable housing, permanent housing, transitional housing for youth and adult women in recovery and senior housing which accept vouchers. In the future NAC housing will be expanding to the Flagstaff and the East Valley to provide for those in the Mesa area however, currently nothing is officially in the works.

Question 2: How can veterans get transportation to programs/meetings that are so far?

Programs provided by NAC are all accessible within their housing communities or wellness centers. These programs are all within walking distance to the light rail system for easy access transportation which accepts transportation vouchers. NAC encourages all to enroll in order to provide the necessary help and form of direction where they can acquire transportation vouchers.

Question 3: When it comes to employment is Mr. Araman's organization working directly with the Department of Economic Security (DES) and if not will he be moving forward in doing so? Does each organization here have a point of contact within the state agencies? What are organizations doing to help with employment?

DES offers an apprenticeship program and anyone with a business can have an apprentice. The NAC helps with acquiring fingerprint clearance cards and have a program that will help those seeking employment clearances. When looking for a job fingerprint is one of the most important due to the reason that if an individual gets denied chances are that they will not get the job. NAC works with getting the decision overturned by providing a clearance card to an employee. This program is form in recognizing the great part of an individual's life rather than the bad decisions they have made. The ACMF understands that a job is important but also sees that having a career out of something is much more rewarding and they are working with veterans find their career. On one end there is work being done to help close this unemployment gap but transportation is still a pursuant issue but there are other issues like finances, mental health or disconnects that are keeping people from reaching their goals. To help they have created the Navigator Program where a navigator is assigned to one community to help with any issues someone may have (POC). More navigators are needed that are

just out in the community center like spiritual places and others so that they can speak with the veterans directly and get them the programs they need. A member from the audience commented that when it comes to employment, a lot of veterans are underqualified or they do not know how to introduce themselves on paper and employers see that first hand in resumes. The Navigator Program will help veterans present themselves more professionally so that they land that job they are applying for.

Question 4: Members of the audience acknowledge that yes there has been a ton of progress but because they live in rural areas and without any transportation, a lot of veterans have to walk for miles sometimes 50 or more and leave their homes. It was voiced that a lot of veterans do not want to leave their homes and feel as though no one is doing anything about it because it is still difficult to acquire the help they need through state agencies.

If veterans need help with transportation there are a variety of ways they can obtain that help. As already mentioned transportation vouchers can be of great assistance but there are also grants that can help with purchasing a vehicle. ADVS provides funding through grants like the Veterans Donation Fund which is up to $100k for one year and one time. The funding can be used for anything and is open to veterans to apply from 10/15/16 to 12/15/16. When filling out the application the applicant will explain what the grant money will be used for and in this specific case they can include they will use it to purchase a van and use it to transport veterans to a from work, nursing homes, doctor appointments, etcetera. If anyone one would like more information on the grants provided to ADVS they can contact Director Wright as she is the point of contact. Tribal communities may also go to nearby car dealerships and possibly get a donation if explained what the vehicle will be used for.

Question 5: If a program is not already developed, where is the help? Where can a person seeking help go and see what resources are being offered?

The speakers agree that although there is help out there for veterans, a challenge is getting the word about it out to the public and most challenging to the tribal communities. For this reason ACMF created the Navigator Program where these trained navigators will reach out to the public and provide information. Navigators are among the public and regular people who are training to know what resources organizations provide to those in need. Currently ACMF is beta testing a customer built network online that matches individuals with the help they need. ADVS also provides the VBCs that can be located through the ADVS site. It is quick as just putting your address into the site and the system will locate the nearest VBC with their contact information. The VBCs are credited to do their job, know what they are doing and currently awaiting to assist those in need.

Question 6: A big concern is that there are not enough providers, are organizations serving to provide the providers as well or just benefits?

The ACMF is currently providing providers and would also like for them to have the military mentality so that they speak to a veteran or someone in the military force, they know how to deal with it. The coalition provides the vetting, training and the skilling to those that will be helping the community and basically drive traffic.

Conclusions and Findings

The Arizona American Indian Veterans town Hall and Benefits Presentation was a huge success largely due to the participants, sponsors, presenters, and all state agencies and organizations that were part of the Town Hall. Some veterans and their families were in attendance that were in crisis and were able to get the help they needed on site. Although some were helped, major issues are still being faced by American Indian Veterans and they are transportation and not knowing about the resources/help available to those that need it.

The issue of transportation came up a number of times during the Town Hall. A lot of times veterans have to walk miles and miles to their destination, as for rides or pay for the transportation and even then it puts a burden because of the expense. Some employed veterans are riding busses one way to work and the amount of money they pay for the bus on top of all the other bills is stressful.

Dots need to be connected within the communities mainly the rural communities so that they are aware of the help being offered to them. Many feel a disconnect and lost as they do not know how to get from point A to point B. Maybe it is the way the information is being presented with some suggesting organizations provides information in the form of a resource guide booklet and mail out to the reservations; with booklets like these, people will be able to communicate with one another. Or maybe, as many mentioned, people from the organizations need to visit the tribes and be available when needed. As Mr. Christopher Tafoya with Arizona at Work mentioned, DES and Arizona at Work is in the planning stages to get representative to go out to the tribal communities and help with employment. Archie Mariano a tribal liaison with DES has made it a point to go out to every tribal community in Arizona and help the people. Because of this people in these communities know Mr. Mariano and know that he is their point of contact. Whether it is for employment, health issues, transportation or others, the people in the tribal communities need people like Mr. Mariano from every organization explaining the resources face-to-face. Many if not most in the communities believe that this will cover the gap that exists.

All the speakers can agree that although there is progress and work being done to help and reach the veterans and families in the tribal communities, there still is a tremendous amount of work and that needs to be done and continues to be done. The Town Hall was a direct response to individuals in tribal communities not knowing what help was available for their veterans and families. Through it not only were the speakers able to share their resources but also a lot of the exhibitors present for the event.

ADVS Action Items/Next Steps

1. Identify six (6) locations for events throughout the State, with the sole purpose of writing claims and delivering information for veterans living on the reservation.
2. Conduct informational presentation on the Native American Settlement Fund, have applications ready.
3. Set appointments for each trip.
4. Ensure that veterans have the documentation they need to process fully developed claims if possible.
5. Send two (2) Veterans Benefit Counselors (VBCs) to each event.

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Appendix

Town Hall Information:

Title: Arizona American Indian Veterans Town Hall and Benefits Presentation
Location: We-Ko-Pa Resort, Fort McDowell, AZ
Date: October 13, 2016
Time: 7:00 AM – 5:00 PM
Attendees: estimated 130

Agenda:

7:00 – 8:00 Continental Breakfast – Wassaja Foyer
8:00 – 9:00 Opening Session
- Post Colors – Ira H. Hayes Post #84
- Pledge of Allegiance – Katarena McLevain, Miss Fort McDowell
- Invocation – The Honorable Raphael Bear, Former President Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation
- Welcome Address – The Honorable Bernadine Burnette, President Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation
- Keynote Address – Ms. Wanda Wright, Director Arizona Department of Veterans' Services

9:00 – 10:00 Town Hall Discussion: "Improving the quality of life of American Indian Veterans and their Families"
10:00 – 10:30 Break – Wassaja Foyer
10:30 – 12:00 Town Hall Discussion (continued)
12:00 – 1:00 Lunch (on your own)
1:00 – 1:30 Native American Settlement Fund – Rory Wilson, ADOR
1:30 – 2:15 VA Compensation – Gary Ochoa, ADVS
2:15 – 3:00 VA Non Service-Connected Pension and Death Benefits – David Mosier, ADVS
3:00 – 3:15 Break – Wassaja Foyer
3:15 – 4:00 Overview of additional VA benefits to include: Health Care, Education, Life Insurance, Home Loan Guaranty – David Guerin, ADVS
4:00 – 4:45 Arizona benefits for veterans – Michelle Sullivan and Bryan Durham, ADVS
- Military and Family Relief Fund
- Veterans Donation Fund
- Homeless Veteran Program
- Women Veterans Programs
- Hunting and Fishing Licenses
- Veteran License Plates and driver's license indicator
- Tax benefits
- Employment
- State Parks

4:45 – 5:00 Closing – Kristine FireThunder, Executive Director
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