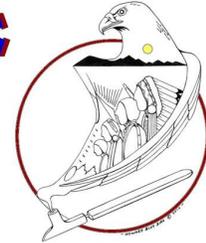




OGLALA SIOUX TRIBE
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Testimony

August 12, 2014

Statement by:

Bryan V. Brewer, Sr.
President,
Oglala Sioux Tribe

Re: Support to Save the VA Black Hills Health Care System - Hot Springs Campus

Before:

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Veteran Affairs
One Hundred Thirteenth Congress
335 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Members of the Committee,

Good Morning Committee Members. My name is Bryan Brewer; I am an enrolled member and current President of the Oglala Sioux Tribe. I was proud to serve this country in the United States Navy from 1965 to 1969. I served three tours as a combat veteran in the Vietnam War. I have been actively utilizing the VA here in Hot Springs since 2001 and I come here today to lend my support to saving the Hot Springs VA facility.

Personal Experience with Services

I am aware of the recent concerns nationally regarding the VA health care system, however my experience with the services at the Hot Springs VA have been exceptional. Most of the health care I needed, they have provided. When specific care couldn't be provided, I was referred to other VA sites and specialists in the region, often receiving financial assistance to travel to those sites.

While this VA facility may seem isolated, it services veterans beyond western South Dakota and many from our sister Lakota tribes of Cheyenne River and Rosebud. Over the years I've met veterans from Wyoming, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota and sometimes beyond depending on what services they've come to receive. So this facility is crucial to the veterans in this entire region.

Quality of Care at VA

As you are aware, there is a current Memorandum of Understanding between the VA and the Indian Health Service (IHS) to "encourage cooperation and resources between the two departments". While this partnership has been shown to work well for our sister tribes in other parts of the country, the preference for local American Indian veterans is to get their health care from the Hot Springs VA. Here, we have consistent health care providers, quick responsiveness to our arising health issues, trust in confidentiality in our provider/patient exchanges, and for the most part appointments are timely and prompt. As outlined in the 2010 report on IHS by former Senator Byron Dorgan, IHS in the Aberdeen Area struggles and has a difficult time to meet basic health needs of its patients. The VA recognizes that we as veterans have very unique health care needs and works hard to provide services to address those needs. For many reasons, IHS is an overwhelmed system and is not equipped to address the very precise and delicate nature and delivery of care that veterans require.

One example of delicate care veterans require is the treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The PTSD treatment here at the Hot Springs VA has the reputation of being one of the best treatment programs in the country. A few years back I was told of a man who travelled from Kentucky to go through the PTSD treatment here. When he arrived, the cycle for treatment had already begun. The story goes that man stayed in one of the Hot Springs parks for several weeks in order to join the next cycle.

Cultural Competency and Sensitivity

I appreciate the cultural competency and sensitivity of the staff and leadership here at the Hot Springs VA. It is one place I can come and feel like I'm treated the same as my non-Indian counterparts. We're all treated with professionalism, we're all treated with dignity and respect, and we're all treated as honored veterans.

Over the years, I have seen more American Indians join the staff here. The Hot Springs VA supports and encourages the use of traditional Lakota practices. They've allowed for us to smudge with our medicines, sing our prayer songs, and on more than one occasion have supported 'inipi' (also known as the sweatlodge ceremony) conducted by a local tribal member. The PTSD Treatment program has components specifically tailored to American Indian veterans.

Cultural and Historical Significance

Culturally for the Lakota, the Hot Springs area has great significance in regards to its healing properties and being a place to collect some of our traditional Lakota herbs and medicines. Located near Hot Springs, Wind Cave is a sacred site to us Lakota. It marks the place we emerged from Mother Earth to the outside world. In a recent letter written to newly appointed Secretary Robert McDonald, delegates stated in that letter, "For more than 100 years, veterans have been coming to Hot Springs to receive health care." We can appreciate this historical significance, as our ancestors have been coming to the Hot Springs area for healing for thousands of years. For us Lakota it makes sense that this area, with its beauty and healing power, would be where the VA was built.

Efforts to increase utilization of VA

To date, there has never been a census of the veterans on our reservation. We estimate that there are 3,500 Oglala Lakota veterans and we know not all of these veterans currently utilize the VA. Some are unaware of the services that they have a right to access. Locally, we have partnered with the Disabled Veterans of America and the American Legion to help inform and recruit veterans to use the VA. Our hope is by increasing the amount of veterans to the VA, revenue to the Hot Springs VA and overall area will also increase.

In conclusion, the Hot Springs VA has a long history, strong cultural ties, and an undeniable commitment to veterans' health. As I sit here today, I think of all the veterans, the warriors, the heroes from our communities who passed through the halls of the Hot Springs VA. They came here for care, for healing, for comradery, and some came here for their final days. Closing the VA in Hot Springs not only changes the landscape of Hot Springs and western South Dakota, it robs veterans of the unique and specialized care they have received here for decades and should receive for decades to come.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before this committee and the opportunity to share my support to save the Hot Springs VA.

Pilamiya (Thank You)