



HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

Subcommittee on Health
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Traverse City, Michigan

Testimony of Aaron Payment, Chairman Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians

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Members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health:

Good afternoon and thank you for inviting me to share our tribal issues on Native American and rural veteran access to care.

My name is Aaron Payment and I am the Chairperson of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians.

Sault Tribe is working toward VA reimbursement for tribal health services for Native American veterans, and eventually, non-Native veterans. The tribe and VA signed an MOU last year for the tribe to provide optometry services to veterans in the Manistique area.

My tribe is one of the largest east of the Mississippi River with 41,000 members. We were re-recognized in 1972 after a 20-year struggle. The 1936 Treaty of Washington recognized my tribe's aboriginal territory where we have resided since time immemorial and where we continue to reside today.

Honoring our warriors is a significant part of our tradition. A high percentage of our people serve or have served in the military and we honor them not only in daily life but also with special feasts, powwows, memorials and ceremonies. The tribe strives to help all members as much as possible and understands that veterans often have special needs. The Sault Tribe is proud of tribal members who have served in the armed forces and continue to support them when they return home from service.

Sault Tribe's Health and Human Services Program spreads across the tribe's seven-county service area in the Eastern Upper Peninsula. Indian Health Service, grants and third-party revenue fund our tribal health services. There are four tribal health care clinics providing primary care in Manistique, Munising, St. Ignace and Sault Ste. Marie. The four community health sites are located in Hessel, Newberry, Escanaba and Marquette. Health services include clinical ambulatory care, community health, purchase referred care, dental, optical, physical therapy, behavioral health and traditional medicine.



Sault Tribe's Monument to War Veterans on our reservation in Sault Ste. Marie. Above the monument, the US, MIA, Sault Tribe, and Canadian flags wave proudly. It is dedicated all Native American veterans everywhere. The last section honoring our warrior women was completed in 2007.

The Tribe's service area covers 8,500 square miles, all rural. Home for many of our veterans limits their ability to seek quality health care through the Veteran's Administration (VA) due to lack of transportation and hazardous weather during the winter months. Sault Tribe has worked hard to provide clinic locations through our seven-county service area to ensure all veterans, and Sault Tribe members alike, receive the same reasonable access to quality health care.

Last fall, the Sault Tribe entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the VA to provide optometry services to all veterans seeking care in the Manistique and Munising area. Our clinics now have the ability and the capacity to see patients on behalf of the VA and receive reimbursement for seeing and treating these patients. This is a collaborative approach between an IHS clinic and the VA that enables the Sault Tribe to offer veterans quality service without having to travel long distances for care. This service is however limited to the Manistique clinic and optical services only.

Native Americans have long identified with their own people and feel most comfortable receiving care from tribal employed doctors who understand and embrace the cultural element of Native American health care.

Sault Tribe is seeking an agreement with the VA that would allow its members who are veteran, as well as non-Native veterans, to receive care at one of the tribal clinics in the seven county service area and receive reimbursement payments from the VA for providing care to the veterans who seek quality care without the burden of travel and financial stress created by the large distances between reservations and VA clinics and hospitals.

We are asking for your support to encourage the VA to develop strong relationship with tribal health facilities through these agreements.