

Linda Holt, Tribal Council Member, Suquamish Tribe

Good morning Senator Murray and Members of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs:

My name is Linda Holt; I am an enrolled Suquamish Tribal member and currently a Tribal Council Member. I am also currently employed by the Suquamish Tribe as their Human Services Director; as such I oversee all of the tribes' social service programs. Suquamish is in the process of establishing a Veteran program to help meet the ongoing needs of our Native American veterans.

I bring you greetings from the Suquamish Tribe and want to thank Senator Murray and the Committee on Veteran's Affairs for holding this field hearing, and recognizing the mutual trust responsibility that exists between the Federal and Tribal governments to recognize and protect our veteran's rights to quality health care on their return home from service to their country.

First I would like to acknowledge my inspiration for my involvement and continued commitment to veterans' issues. My brother Frank Cordero, a Marine Corp veteran of the Vietnam War. Frank was supposed to be here with you today to provide testimony on behalf of the all the Native American veterans' he serves, but his daughter is undergoing heart surgery today, and it is important for him to be with her at this time. I would ask for all of your prayers on her behalf for a speedy recovery. I have followed Frank's integration back into his family and tribal culture since his return from Vietnam, and I have seen first hand the difficulty he had and still has in accessing care and benefits.

It is a well established fact that Native Americans have served in the Armed Forces of the United States, more per capita then any other ethnic group, in every conflict the U.S. has ever engaged in from the Revolutionary War to present. Despite the fact that our ancestors did so even though they were not even citizens of this country. What is not well established is the fact that Native Americans are the one minority group that has the least access to use of veterans' services they are entitled to.

Native American Iraq and Afghan Veterans of this state returning from overseas face the same inherent well documented problems faced by their Great grandfathers of World War II, grandfathers of Korea and fathers of Vietnam. Many return to the rural reservation community where there are little or no services available to meet their needs, neither county, State, nor Federal. It is a proven fact that the majority of veterans returning from war are faced with varying degrees of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This has been true since the first wars fought by our United States veterans. The Veterans Administration and the branches of our Armed Services have done very little for our warriors returning home to identify PTSD and educate not only the veteran, but the entire family that he is returning to.

Usually the wife and children have learned how to survive and function as a family without Dads' presence. When the veteran returns home he or she is faced with how to integrate themselves back into the family dynamics. When faced with the repercussions of PTSD and their inability to understand what is happening to them, they often tend to self-medicate

themselves with alcohol, drugs, or a combination of both. This often leads to the possibility of suicide, domestic violence, sometimes to the murder of their spouse.

The children of the family have not only had to deal with the parent being gone for long periods of time, but also become faced with the person their returning parent has become. This can be emotionally devastating for these children as they struggle to accept the absence of and fear for the safe return of their parent, and then are faced with the very real problems brought about by the PTSD the veteran returns with.

There needs to be a better way to integrate these veterans back into their families and mainstream society. There should be a holistic approach for the whole family so that everyone is receiving the knowledge they need to address the issues that arise from the absence and return of their loved one. Before a veteran is discharged the whole family should go through counseling on how to address the issues of PTSD and the impact it could have on their family. This should be followed up by the Veterans' Administration in the treatment of the PTSD, not only of the veteran, but of the entire family.

The question arises as to what is not working within the VA system to help our returning veterans with their reintegration back into their family settings as well as mainstream society. The lack of congressionally funded outreach programs, county, state and federal, designed to assist veterans' in their reintegration. These programs never reach down to the rural reservation communities, nor consider the unique circumstances of minorities or the rural nature and isolation of reservation communities. This is not only true of Native American veterans but also for all veterans who return to rural settings. Often a trip to the VA hospital is an all day endurance for our veterans. This is very difficult for our elderly World War II vets, and most times they just refuse to go because they cannot endure the trip. The lack of health facilities for our veterans to utilize in the area they live is a very large problem. Now we have just faced the closure of the VA hospital in Walla Walla, this was a key facility to Native American Veterans in Oregon, Eastern Washington and Alaska. With the growing number of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan we need to increase the numbers of medical facilities available to veterans for treatment, not reduce them. As I stated it is increasingly difficult for veterans to access the care they need with the limited number of facilities available, but they also are faced with being turned away for treatment because many of the existing facilities are on a priority service only system due to lack of funding.

Also as previously stated there is a general lack of knowledge among veterans and community organizations on what benefits the veteran is entitled to. VA needs to develop an outreach program, once again not only for the veteran, but for the veterans' family and community organizations that are trying to help them.

This leads me to what is working in Indian Country to assist our Native American Veterans. A grassroots network of veterans, including my brother Frank Cordero recognized the need to help our veterans obtain the services they needed. This core group of Tribal Veterans Representatives came together to develop a system to help. For the last 15 years the one bright light for Native Veterans within the State of Washington and several other states across the nation has been the Tribal Veterans Representative (TVR) program. First started here, this program utilizes a Native American of the community of each of the 24 different Tribal communities to assist, provide

support and aid to any and all veterans residing within their tribal community. Where very little services were provided before, the TVR's have been instrumental in assisting not only recent returning veterans, but veterans and eligible dependent family members from other eras as well. Native American Veterans through the TVR program have been able to access claims for compensation, pension benefits, housing, employment, education, insurance and most importantly the outreach to them within their communities.

In closing I would like to stress that this country made a promise to these veterans that are returning from a war this country committed them to, in return they were promised that this country would take care of them on their return and provide them with quality health care and to meet their needs. It is time for Congress to recognize their responsibility to these veterans that have offered their lives for the many freedoms we enjoy, and sometimes take for granted, in this country. We need to always remember that if it wasn't for our veterans continued willingness to serve when called upon, and to lay down their lives, we would not enjoy the freedom to share our views in this manner with our government.

Again I would like to offer my heartfelt gratitude to Senator Murray for her continued effort to help our veterans from all walks of life and nationality. Native Americans in Washington State estimated at 10,000 and their families continue to offer our support to keep you there. I also would like to give my personal thanks and the thanks of the Suquamish Tribe to the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs for their continued support of veteran's issues.