

Blackfeet Veterans Alliance
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Testimony of Leo Pollock, Blackfeet Veterans Alliance Administrator
On behalf of the Blackfeet Veterans Alliance (BVA) of the Blackfeet
Nation

Senate Veterans Affairs Committee

November 30th, 2022

The Blackfeet Veterans Alliance and the Blackfeet Tribe would like to thank Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, and Members of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee for this great opportunity to provide this written statement on the challenges that our veterans face on the Blackfeet Reservation. The Blackfeet Reservation covers three thousand square miles and it is often forgotten that within the exterior boundaries of our reservation, there are two counties that are served by the Blackfeet Nation. These counties are Glacier County which makes up the majority of the reservation and a portion of Pondera County on the southern end which is the community of Heart Butte. Valier and Dupuyer are border towns on the Blackfeet Reservation. Glacier County consists of the following towns; Babb/St Mary, Browning, Cut Bank, East Glacier and Santa Rita. Pondera County includes Brady, Conrad, Dupuyer, Heart Butte and Valier.

Blackfeet Veterans Alliance was created in 2001 to assist the American Legion Post #127 which was established after World War II and also to help the Blackfeet Warrior Society which was created in 1998. BVA was created to be an advocate on the Local, State, and National level for veterans in both groups as well as the veterans who choose not to participate in those groups but still need a voice.

The National Congress of American Indians states that, “According to the 2010 census, it is estimated that over 150,000 veterans identified as

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American Indian and Alaska Native alone.” Administrators before me were tasked with building a living document to keep track of the veterans who live and reside in both Glacier and Pondera Counties as well as the veterans who may reside off the reservation but still maintain close ties with home. Some of the list has been lost due to the changing of Administrators as well as building and location changes. Upon my arrival to this position in January of 2021, I was able to locate one list that had over 500 veteran names both living and deceased. Over the past two years we have re-built that list to a running total of 894 veterans living and deceased and broke that list down to a total of 766 veterans that are still living and maintain close ties with the reservation.

This number is close to a survey completed by Stacker.com in July of 2022 showing a total of 764 veterans in the Glacier County area and 494 Pondera County veterans which gives a total of 1258 Veterans. Montana Veteran Affairs Division (MVAD) currently assists 299 veterans in Glacier County and 78 veterans from Pondera County. Dr. Judy Hayman, current Executive Director of Montana VA Healthcare Systems had said there were only 278 veterans in Glacier County, however this was the number given by the Glacier County Clerk and Recorder as 2002 was when they began recording the veterans DD214 electronically instead of manually. A count of 278 veterans would exclude every veteran who has served our country from 2001 on back to when they began recording these records in World War I as well as the proper veteran count from Pondera County.

Barriers

I bring these numbers to light due to the geographical, logistical and financial barriers that we face here on the reservation. Most larger VA Urban centers are located at a minimum of two hours away with Ft. Harrison in Helena MT which is a 4-hour drive one way from Browning

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with ideal driving conditions. This drive can easily become a 6–8-hour drive in winter conditions. Our logistical and financial barriers that our veterans face on the Blackfeet Reservation is that these 30 minutes to 2-hour trips becomes more than just a quick trip for a VA appointment. This now becomes a trip where they have to plan on making this their monthly shopping trip to gather other supplies that they may need on top of the appointment in itself. Several other veterans do not even have the transportation or the finances to make these trips. They then have to ask friends and relatives for transportation help to make these trips. We here at the BVA are available to assist our veterans in getting them to their appointments whether that be through financial support, giving them a ride ourselves, or coordinating with the Great Plains Transportation from Rocky Boy to assist them in getting them to their appointments in a timely manner. We also understand the DAV vehicle is available as well.

VA/IHS MOU

It has recently come to our attention that the last time a veteran was able to receive care at the Browning Unit Indian Health Service (IHS) was around 2014. After this time frame, several veterans began shifting their care to the Cut Bank VA Clinic which is 30 minutes from Browning. For our veterans further north in the communities of Babb and St. Mary this becomes a One-hour trip one way, once again during ideal driving conditions. After moving their primary care from Browning to IHS, we had run into issues where several veterans chose to take the trip to Ft. Harrison instead of staying local with the Cut Bank VA Clinic due to mistreatment from the staff.

In the end of July 2022, we held a benefits fair for the veterans in all of the surrounding communities. One of the constant questions was, “Why

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can't we go to IHS anymore?" This lead us back to the establishment of the MOU between the VA and IHS and why our veterans weren't being provided the services that was worked out in a National MOU between the two parties.

VA Rocky Mountain Network better known as VISN 19 began a series of meetings starting with a Town Hall with our veterans and then a meeting with the VA Healthcare Systems, IHS and the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council (BTBC) in September 2022.

After leaving the meeting with the Acting CEO of the Browning IHS and the VISN 19 team with no real answer to why IHS couldn't honor the MOU, we shifted our attention and efforts to asking the Southern Piegan Health Center (SPHC) if they could help re-establish an Outpatient VA Clinic. SPHC has shown a willingness to work with the VA to provide services to all of our veterans in the surrounding areas and currently already see non-enrolled members for regular appointments.

SPHC currently has one Medical Doctor, two Family Nurse Practitioners, a Physical Therapist and a Licensed Addiction Counselors as well as the support staff in place to help our veteran population in the surrounding areas. The VA is currently renting a room at the New Eagle Shields that was previously used for the Outpatient Clinic as well as the telehealth appointments. SPHC has said in the interim time they can bring the supplies needed to attend to our veterans needs until the VA can supply what is needed on their end. I think this is a great opportunity for everyone involved as well as a truly beneficial end result.

In closing, I will continue to fight for our veterans not just here on the Blackfeet Reservation, but for those located close to us who may feel more at ease with someone they may haven known for years and have

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already created a mutual trust with the provider who will be there for years to come. This will create many opportunities, break down barriers, and give our veterans a peace of mind knowing they just need to make it in to town for the care and help that they need. Thank you all for your time today.