



# Great Plains Veterans Services Center

"Veterans helping Veterans for a better future"

May 13, 2024

The Honorable Jon Tester  
311 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington DC 20510

The Honorable Jerry Moran  
521 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington DC 20510

Dear Chairman Tester and Ranking Member Moran,

Thank you for the invitation to testify before the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs' hearing entitled, "Frontier Health Care: Ensuring Veterans' Access No Matter Where They Live." On behalf of the Native Veterans and rural Montana Veterans I serve, I am honored to provide the following written testimony.

American Indians have enriched our communities, strengthened our country, and made lasting contributions to the United States, including significant military service to defend our nation. They significantly have more members per capita than any other group serving our country. Like most Americans, American Indians also seek to live the "American Dream," unbothered by economic hardship. Unfortunately, for many of our Native Veterans, living in prosperity is just a dream. Despite their sacrifice and service to our nation, many Native Veterans return home to poor conditions, conditions one would expect to find in a third-world country, not a prosperous nation like the United States.

Tribal communities also suffer from chronically high unemployment rates (60%-85% at any given time) due mainly to our detachment from mainstream corporate America. Income and employment data for the reservations document a high level of economic distress, especially when compared to local, state, and national levels.

Living conditions on Indian reservations are deplorable. As a result, Veterans must often live in unstable conditions, with very little access to steady employment, reliable housing, or basic needs. In addition to the poor economic environment, reservation communities face the challenge of rampant drug and alcohol abuse. Those Veterans whom the Great Plains Veterans Services Center currently assist struggle to provide a stable quality of life for themselves and their families. Veterans living on Indian reservations have unequal access to benefits and services they have earned. Additionally, a lack of information on how to access and use those benefits can place Native Veterans in this area at a much higher risk

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for poverty, becoming economically disadvantaged, at risk of homelessness, and being in a state of societal depression.

Additionally, Veterans are more likely than the general population to commit suicide. According to the Montana DPHHS 2016 Suicide Mortality Review Team Report, 22% of suicides in Montana between January 01, 2014 and March 01, 2016 were Veterans. Amongst American Indians, 19% of suicides during the same period were Veterans. The resources and services the GPVSC can provide give the Veteran a means to manage their issues and provide some stability to an otherwise very unstable lifestyle and environment, saving a Veteran's life.

Due to all these conditions, Veterans receive very little priority and must compete with the general population to receive even minimum services. The Great Plains Veterans Services Center seeks to eliminate this disparity. Rather than rely on substandard and overtaxed tribal/local resources, the Great Plains Veterans Services Center utilizes different funding streams and strategies to bring resources to Veterans. Direct assistance resources are explicitly provided for low-and moderate-income Veterans, which are not available to the general population. By focusing strictly on Veterans and ensuring their quality-of-life needs are met, the Great Plains Veterans Services Center will become a model for the tribal communities to follow. Those Veterans whom the Great Plains Veterans Services Center assists will become an asset to their Tribe.

A big issue is the lack of knowledge Veterans, Native and non-Native, have on VA benefits. The VA has done a poor job of educating the Veteran population about ALL the services they have earned in their service to our nation. With the passage of the PACT Act, the VA has conducted a number of clinics to address this issue. However, more is definitely needed to ensure Veterans are knowledgeable about these services. By educating and reaching out to Native and rural Veterans, the VA can also help the greater Montana community. Ensuring Veterans have access to VA services will reduce the impact on local services that would otherwise go to other residents.

Another issue facing Native Veterans and rural Veterans is the lack of transportation to access services. While telehealth options exist for Veterans, access to telehealth technology is disparate. Often, Veterans must travel to their providers, which can be hundreds of miles away. Additionally, Veterans, especially elderly Veterans, do not have the means to make the drive.

In answer to the conditions facing Native communities, the Great Plains Veterans Services Center has stepped in to bridge the gap between

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federal resources and Native Veterans. Through funding from the VA, the GPVSC has provided transportation services to Native and rural Montana Veterans. In 2023, we supported 288 Veterans with transportation to their VA medical and VA-referred medical appointments. We have completed 451 trips and driven 162,819 miles. Our transportation service area covers 28 of 56 Montana counties and six of seven Indian reservations.

Additionally, the GPVSC has conducted outreach through the SSG Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program. As part of the program, we assisted 741 Veterans with requesting discharge paperwork, direct assistance for groceries and other essential needs items, care and wellness packages, and referrals to other service providers.

The work the GPVSC has done is because of the funding made available through the VA. We hope that this continued support to local organizations will continue in order to help break down the barriers that Native Veterans and rural Montana Veterans encounter in trying to access services they have earned in their service to this great nation.

Sincerely,

Chauncey L. Parker  
Executive Director  
Great Plains Veterans Services Center