

NVTI Podcast Series

SERVING NATIVE AMERICAN VETERANS

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[Upbeat intro music plays]

NARRATOR: Welcome to the National Veterans' Training Institute Podcast Series, where we discuss employment challenges and other pressing issues affecting today's veterans.

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HANNAH: Welcome! I'm Hannah Toney, and in this episode, *Serving Native American Veterans*, we'll be talking about the challenges facing Native American veterans and ways to better serve them.

I'm lucky to be joined by three veterans' employment and training professionals who collectively have over 30 years of experience serving Native American veterans. JP McCoy has been a Workforce Specialist, DVOP, Native American DVOP, and Mobile Center Manager for 2 years and is joining us from Topeka, Kansas. Welcome, JP! And tell us, what was your branch of service and how long did you serve?

JP: Well, I was active Army for two years from two deployments: Afghanistan and the one I'm currently on, the Border Mission down here in Arizona. But I've been with the Army National Guard 11 years. I'm a 12 Bravo Combat Engineer.

HANNAH: JP, we're glad to have you on the podcast. Thank you so much. Next up is Paul Pelot who is a DVOP with over 10 years of experience. Paul is joining us from Bellingham, Washington. Where did you serve and for how long?

PAUL: I served in the United States Navy from 1983 to 1988. I was an Aviation Electrician and I worked on F-14 Tomcats.

HANNAH: Awesome. Thank you so much. Welcome, Paul! I'd also like to introduce Archie Barrow next. Archie is joining us from North Carolina. He has extensive experience in the positions he's served, ranging from a DVOP, a LVER, and even the JVSG State Director for North Carolina. Archie, what was your branch of service and how long were you in service?

ARCHIE: Hannah, I was in the U.S. Army from 1980 to 1986. And I was in the Army Reserve from 1986 to 1993 serving as a Field Artillery and Quartermaster Officer.

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HANNAH: Thank you for your service, Archie. It's an honor to have all of you with us here today participating.

Let's have you each start off by telling us a little bit about the nations or tribes you have worked with in your service area. What unique experiences have you had in working with these nations or tribal communities?

JP: Well, I'm a member of the Seneca/Cayuga Nation based in Oklahoma. I've worked with the Iowa, Kickapoo, Potawatomi, and Sac and Fox tribes within the State of Kansas. Something unique in the State of Kansas is we have Haskell Indian Nations University which is an all-private Native American College in Lawrence, KS. I'm also an adjunct professor there as well. There are typically around 500 Tribal Nations represented at Haskell on this campus and there's a lot of Native Veterans that are attending also. I would say the biggest factor that I have had to work with concerning the reservations is location. The Kickapoo are right outside of Topeka so finding employment isn't too much of an issue. However, the Iowa and the Sac and Fox are located in Northern Kansas in a very rural area that is more of a farming community. And the Kickapoo aren't in much of a better area. The economies they live in, they're not thriving. Bottom line is if you want to get a well-paying career, they'll have to move from the reservation. As a Native American that is a very hard decision to make.

HANNAH: Oh, wow. Yes, I bet. And the location is really a huge factor for our Native American veterans looking to establish a career. Paul, how about you?

PAUL: Well, I started my Veterans' Representative career ten years ago at WorkSource Everett in Snohomish County, Washington. I worked closely with the Tulalip tribe. That point, I was commuting 120 miles a day roundtrip for four and a half years. But in about 2015, I finally transferred to WorkSource Whatcom, which is way closer to home. That's when I started working with the Lummi Nation, near Ferndale and the Nooksack tribe in Deming, Washington. As previously mentioned, there are different challenges for rural versus urban tribes. The Tulalip tribe has a large casino on the I-5 corridor and that's a big draw for tourists, whereas the Lummi and Nooksack tribes are more rural and do not have as many resources as the more urban tribes. That's not to say that urban tribes don't have their own challenges. The challenges just may vary from tribe to tribe.

HANNAH: That definitely resonates with what JP said earlier. The idea of rural versus urban tribes is honestly something I hadn't thought of before. Archie, would you be willing to go next?

ARCHIE: Well, I worked with the Lumbee Tribe while I was the state JVSG Director, and they were very receptive to us when we went and talked to them about putting a DVOP in their tribe to assist their in-need veterans to obtain employment since they're in the

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most underserved and depressed area of the State of North Carolina. And they welcomed us, they told us about their history with their veterans. They've had a tribal member serve in every conflict/war that the United States has had since World War I. They are very patriotic. They have a museum there with the Veterans Service Offices they have there for the veterans in the Lumbee Tribe. They did a lot for us. It took a while to get everything worked out to where we could put a DVOP there, but when we placed that DVOP there, it was a big day for them. They brought out all the stops; they recorded it, they sent it to Washington D.C., the tribal chairman was there (he had several guests), we had the U.S. DOL Regional Director from Atlanta there, the state DVET, agency directors from the Department of Commerce. And the one thing that honored me that day, they pinned me with the order of the Lumbee Warrior for the dedication and hard work that we did and I did to stand behind it and keep it going in order to make this come to fruition to put a DVOP in the tribe to help their most in-need veterans.

HANNAH: Wow! That must have been an amazing honor, Archie! Now that we've learned a little bit more about everyone's background, will one of you please explain a little bit to us the difference between federally recognized tribes versus state recognized tribes? How do these federal and state designations impact funding and your ability to serve Native American veterans? Can I have JP and Paul answer this question? What do you think JP?

JP: That's a great question. Federally recognized tribes receive land, reservation land to be exact. They receive services such as Indian health services, federal funding. For example, Native American tribes and services received over \$219 million in funding to combat the COVID-19 epidemic. Only federally recognized tribes can attend Haskell Indian Nations University. Treaties drive most of the decisions and congress is the only legislative body who can give and take away federal recognition. An example would be the Miami tribe. They are split at this time. You have the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma who are federally recognized because they chose to move when the United States Government forced the action. However, the other group stayed behind in Indiana and took land in exchange for them to give up their tribal identity. They are now known as the Miami Nation of Indians of the State of Indiana. They formed a 501c and are recognized by the State of Indiana.

Treaties exist with the Tribes in the lower 48 States and Alaskan Natives. The Native population of Hawaii are not federally recognized because Hawaii was annexed July 12th of 1898. Again, because the Native people of Hawaii are not federally recognized they are unable to attend Haskell Indian Nations University, 'cause you have to be federally recognized. State recognition does not confer the same benefits as federally recognized tribes; it acknowledges tribal status within the State but does not guarantee funding from the State or federal government. State recognized tribes are not necessarily federally

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recognized tribes; however, some federally recognized tribes are also recognized by the State. Federal recognition remains the primary way in which tribes seek to be recognized. After this explanation, I have not experienced working with tribal members who are only State recognized. There's only 13 states that have State recognition which is: Alabama, Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, Vermont, and Virginia. These are the only States that currently have State recognized tribes.

HANNAH: That was an excellent breakdown, JP! Thank you so much. I'm sure there's a lot of legal and cultural complexity that exists when working with federal and state recognized tribes. Let's direct the same question to Paul real quickly.

PAUL: Just like JP said, the tribes that I've worked with, they've all been federally recognized tribes, which is beneficial because they receive more funding from the federal government. They also work closely with the BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) and have their own governing body; it's literally a nation within a nation. Native Americans serve in the Military at a much higher rate than other citizens. In fact, nationwide, about 2-3% serve in the Military, whereas about 30% of tribal the members that I've worked with answer the call to serve in the Armed Forces. It's clear from their Veteran's Day Celebrations that I've attended that the tribes have great honor for their veterans. Furthermore, the tribes I have worked with in Washington State refer to their veterans as "Warrior."

HANNAH: And absolutely, as veterans, they should be very proud! I do want to go a little bit deeper here and ask: What are tribal governments and how are they structured? Why is this important information to know as a veteran service provider who may be in contact with Native American veterans? Archie and JP. What do you all have to say? Let's start with Archie.

ARCHIE: Well, I will say that the tribal government in the Lumbee Tribe is structured just like that of our federal government. They have an Executive Branch (which is the chairman), then they have a Legislative Branch (which is the tribal council), and then they have a Judicial Branch (where they have four judges that sit there). And each branch mirrors the functions of the Federal Government within the same roles and responsibilities.

JP: Yes, I can add to this. tribal governments are mostly structured one of two ways. Some have the traditional structure with a Chief, 2nd Chief as the head of the tribe, and other offices below them such as council members, business committee, and so on. The other half run strictly by a tribal council where a majority vote among the council leads the tribe. It really doesn't matter much on the tribal structure as what are you going to do for the veterans and the tribe. You do want to meet with the leaders and the tribe for

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sure, but once you have done that and explained what you would like to do for the veteran members of the tribe you have to follow through with all your commitments. If you say you will be there every other Wednesday to meet with veterans, you had better be there. Your word with the tribes is the beginning of trust. If you can't be trusted to do what you said you would do, the tribal leaders would lose faith and it's gonna be harder to work with the tribe. I'd also like to add that our own governmental structure came from the Iroquois Confederation. That was the Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, Onondaga, and the Mohawk tribes. They gathered together at the Great Council. Ben Franklin visited them at one time. Seeing how they would send members to the Great Council from each tribe, he liked that, and that's how we ended up getting our governmental structure the way it is currently.

HANNAH: Oh, wow! Those are all great answers. Thank you. My takeaway here is that working with tribal governments takes a great deal of commitment and trust. So, with this information laid out, what do veteran service providers need to understand about Native American culture that may deviate from their own culture? What are some general best practices you can share in specifically working with Native American veterans, especially for those veteran service providers who might just be starting off? Let's have Paul and JP field these questions.

PAUL: Yeah, thanks, Hannah. I'd want to say to veteran representatives that are initially reaching out to their local tribes, to try to use, like, a beginner mindset. It's perfectly natural for an outsider not to fully understand the Native culture. And I feel like that's actually preferred, versus acting like you understand the complexities of each of the individual tribes. Another helpful hint that I've been given by other Vet Reps is to show up with a gift; nothing fancy, preferably something that was made by you, or made by a member of your family. It took me a while to get connected with the tribes, but when I showed up with Army Surplus gear, it was well received and they even asked for more boots and sleeping systems, so I made a second delivery. The tribes really loved the fact that I was going above and beyond to take care of their Warriors (Veterans).

JP: Yes, it's always good practice to bring something with you like what I call the goodie bag. I've got rules and regulations in the State of Kansas on what I can do, so the bag usually has pens, pencils, note pads, etc. It is customary to bring a gift. Not all tribes are this way, though, but it does help. Native American tribes can be a bit stand-offish and they are a proud people; they're proud of their past. And I'll tell you, the first time I visited the Iowa Tribe, the Chief took me into their cultural center, and he led me through the past and history of the Iowa Tribe. You must gain their trust and the best way to do this is always deliver. Keep in touch, be there when you say you will, keep tribal leaders in the know. The more you do this to establish and keep your contacts, word will eventually spread, and things will start to move for you. However, don't expect this to be over night; with some tribes this can take months.

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HANNAH: Thank you so much, JP. Those numerous cultural differences could definitely make working with Native American veterans a challenge. So, now let's shift the topic here and talk very specifically about employment. What unique challenges do Native American veterans face in their search for employment? Would you weigh in here, Archie and Paul?

ARCHIE: Sure, Hannah. Well, in North Carolina, the Lumbee Tribe (as I said earlier) they are in a very rural area with high unemployment, the highest in the State. There's not many resources there or jobs for the veterans. Not only this but many of those veterans are facing a lot of the same issues as other non-veterans or other veterans we have across the State (i.e., substance abuse problems along with justice involved issues). And by being in a rural area, this complicates it even more. It makes looking for employment an even greater challenge as sometimes they have to drive thirty, forty, fifty miles away to get a meaningful job, so it just really makes it hard.

PAUL: Yeah, absolutely. Just like Archie said, I've witnessed how certain veterans feel isolated within the tribes or they find it more secure not to venture outside the tribes for employment or benefits. Sometimes they're hesitant about meeting with the State Veterans' Representative, especially those veterans (Warriors) that have been through periods of war. You know, they may be suffering from PTS (Post-Traumatic Stress) or anxiety. And those issues are complicated by the fact that they're isolated on the tribe. They may feel, you know, more safe and secure living on tribal lands. And I've found that it can be difficult for them to engage in life outside the tribe. That's one barrier that can be tough to overcome but if Vet Reps are supportive to the veterans on a regular basis, it can make all the difference in the world.

HANNAH: I appreciate you all sharing these with us. There are certainly a lot of challenges that Native American veterans might need to overcome. And with the COVID-19 pandemic, I'm sure things have become even more complicated for you all as service providers. JP and Archie, how has COVID-19 affected tribal communities as a whole? How has this changed your approach in serving Native American veterans? And finally, with the COVID situation we have now, what are some best practices around how to connect with tribes?

JP: One advantage I have in the State of Kansas is I have a 30ft truck with seven computers in the back and a standalone internet system. The veterans could come in and search for employment, work on their resume with my assistance, practice interview skills, and even print their resumes right there in the truck. I was able to drive to each reservation for sure along with communities that don't have a brick-and-mortar workforce center. I had established monthly locations. However, when COVID hit, my truck was sidelined first because I traveled eastern Kansas border to border. Native people are more about face-to-face interactions. The tribes understand what COVID has

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done to Kansas and the Nation. All I could do was work over the phone with the understanding that when the COVID restrictions loosened up, they know I'll be back because of the trust that I established with them. The Native American people are very resilient. Honestly, I can't wait to go back out and continue the work!

ARCHIE: Yeah, since the start of the pandemic I haven't worked with the Lumbee Tribe as I am working in another area of the State now with homeless veterans.

HANNAH: Even though you haven't worked with your specific tribe, I think you bring up an important point here; there are many overlapping special veteran populations out there that need our help. With that being said, what social support systems or outlets are there for Native American veterans who might be struggling after their separation from service? How do you personally go about building trust and rapport with these veterans? Paul, what are your thoughts?

PAUL: Yeah, like it's been mentioned before, consistency is a big part of it. But I did have one positive experience that'll stick with me, a few years ago, meeting with a Marine Corps Veteran from the Lummi Nation. He'd fallen through the cracks of the Veterans Administration for about five years. He had returned from Iraq and was just... felt isolated on the tribes. And once I got him connected with the VA for medical treatment and guided him to a good VSO (Veterans Service Officer), he was found 50% disabled through the VA which helped him obtain his bachelor's degree in environmental sciences. So, that was a real positive outcome there.

HANNAH: That's fantastic! I'm so glad you were able to help that veteran, Paul. How about you, JP?

JP: As I said before, you must commit on what you said you will do. If you're going to put a resume together for a veteran by Thursday, it should be emailed close of business on that Wednesday. If you're working with a reservation that day, the tribal services need to help get the word out. If you have a monthly rotation or a bi-weekly rotation and you're getting people the help they need, the word will spread.

HANNAH: Very insightful. Thank you so much. That word of mouth is incredibly important. So, let me ask a follow-up question to that. In addition to available support systems and outlets, what other resources are there for Native American veterans regarding healthcare, employment, housing, education, and so forth?

JP: Well, some tribes are better than others when it comes to services. My own tribe has healthcare, employment services, housing assistance, educational assistance, substance abuse assistance. Once you know what services the tribe can provide, you can fill the gaps. Once you have established the trust of leaders and services, they will be more than open to assist. It comes down to everyone coming together to provide all

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the assistance for the Native Veteran. Successful tribal members make the tribe stronger. Depending on the location you can also look at how close VA services are located as well.

HANNAH: Archie, what resources would you add?

ARCHIE: Yeah, some of the other resources that the Lumbee Tribe have, they have their own Veterans Service Officers that assist the veterans in filing for benefits. They also have Tribal HUD-VASH that they have been very successful in using to get the homeless veterans housed that are members of the tribe. They also have their own medical clinic on tribal lands that the veterans can go to for medical assistance. There is a Native American DVOP that works with the veterans for employment assistance. And I almost forgot! There is the University of North Carolina - Pembroke that was established in 1887 for educating the Native Americans in the area.

HANNAH: Those are all fantastic resources! Thank you for sharing all of those suggestions. Before we end this podcast episode, I'd like to ask you all one final question: What has brought you the most pride or joy in working with your local tribes?

ARCHIE: I'd would say that, what brought me the most joy, was them recognizing the State of North Carolina for placing the DVOP in the Lumbee tribe, as a Lumbee tribal member, and for the recognition they gave us for doing this.

JP: I would say the joy I receive has always been in working with the veterans, especially my brothers and sisters from all tribes. I love working with them to write the next chapter in their lives; I'm doing my job to help them find better employment (possibly change their lives in the process. This kind of uplifting news tends to spread, just like any good story!

HANNAH: Thank you Archie and JP. How about you, Paul?

PAUL: Well, I find working with the tribes to be a privilege. I feel like you're not automatically accepted into the tribes until you've shown good faith towards their veterans, which also parallels other veterans organizations. It's part of that consistency piece that I mentioned earlier about doing outreach. The tribes can experience infrequent contact from government agencies, and I think that can cause some skepticism. Once you're accepted it's a real honor to serve the tribal population. I'm also extremely humbled when they invite me to their meetings, and especially their Veteran's Day Celebrations. I'm able to see firsthand how much pride they have in their tribal nation, the great deal of pride and seriousness they have when serving in the United States Armed Forces, and the cultural reverence they have in honoring their veterans. It's really moving.

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HANNAH: That's outstanding. Everyone, thank you again for joining us on today's podcast. Remember, you can find this and other podcasts at Resources at NVTI.org. We also invite you to continue the conversation at *Making Careers Happen for Veterans: Community of Practice*. Thank you.

[Upbeat outro music plays]

NARRATOR: This podcast is brought to you by the National Veterans' Training Institute, whose mission is to further develop and enhance the professional skills of veterans' employment and training service providers throughout the United States. This program is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor Veterans Employment & Training Service.

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Thank you.

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