

Working with American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans

An Overview



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Background

For generations, Native American and Alaska Native veterans have had a long history of proud and distinguished service in the U.S. military forces. To date, more than 3.6 million veterans of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) heritage have served in the U.S. military. Per capita, AI/AN veterans serve at a higher rate in the Armed Forces than any other group of Americans and have served in all the nation's wars since the Revolutionary War. In most Native American communities, veterans are held in high regard and esteem.

Despite this esteemed service, Native Americans experience more poverty, have less education, have higher unemployment rates, and are more likely to lack health insurance than any other veteran group. They are also among the least likely to utilize their earned benefits. Moreover, resources, including finances, physical infrastructure, and human capital, are often stretched thin in tribal or Alaska Native village communities. Native American veterans' challenges or barriers include a lack of transportation across long distances to Veterans Affairs (VA) and other facilities, availability of culturally appropriate care, difficulty navigating the VA system, and a history of complex federal, state, and tribal relationships.

The United States must honor its commitments to AI/AN veterans. It is the local, state and federal government's responsibility to provide quality services to AI/AN veterans which comes from their service to this country and the federal government's treaty and trust obligations to AI/AN people. Delivery of these services to AI/AN veterans must be a coordinated effort and afforded, regardless of whether they are living on rural reservation lands or in major urban areas.

Native American veteran tribal communities are unique from other veteran populations across the nation that bring both strengths and challenges to the development of outreach and engagement in planning events for American Indian tribes and Alaska Native veterans. Tribes are diverse: there are more than 565 federally recognized American Indian tribes and Alaska Native communities in the United States, each with its own culture, history, language, spiritual practices, and form of government. Tribes are sovereign nations. They are considered "domestic dependent nations" by the US government and are entitled to govern themselves. Typically, this means federal programs work in partnership with tribal governments. Sometimes states also work with tribes, but tribes are generally not held to state law. Tribes often have Veterans Committees as a part of, or advisory to, the Tribal Council or governing entity that assist in facilitating veterans' programs.

Building Effective Partnerships

As a DVOP specialist, building a relationship with tribal partners takes commitment, consistency, and research to learn about the community. Advance preparation and ongoing self-education will help to make connections and foster relationships that, together, build networks and create and sustain successful partnerships.

The following attributes are beneficial when working with special populations, such as Native American veteran tribal communities, to build successful relationships:

- Commitment to the long term, not just one project,
- Consistent follow-up on questions, concerns, or ideas,
- Humility—relationships are often at their best when they are open to bi-directional learning,
- Excellent listening skills, and
- Delivering on promises.

Further, while Native American cultures are highly diverse with each tribal community having its own set of expectations, beliefs, and practices, there are a number of common elements as well. These common elements will be useful when working to build relationships among the Native American communities. Some strategies to consider leveraging tribal commonalities include:

1. First and foremost, connect with the Veterans Director and local Career One-Stop on the reservation. Each tribe has their own Veteran Director, who you should contact prior to doing any work on the reservation, visiting the Career One-Stop, meeting veterans, or scheduling meetings. Most reservations have a Career One-stop that are specific to the Native American Veteran; some are bigger than a typical AJC because of the specific services they offer.

It is imperative that regular and open communication is maintained with both the One-stop and the Veteran Director.

2. Identify a trusted community person who can serve as a local contact. Such a person is usually associated with local leadership and has a deep understanding of the community, including cultural beliefs and practices, and awareness of local social networks. This contact should also be familiar with Veteran Organizations and other Veteran-serving programs in the area and can assist with navigation of the community and its resources for Veterans who live there. For assistance in making connections with such contacts, look to the community Tribal Councils and Tribal nonprofit organizations.
3. Meet with local leaders or Council members early in the outreach process, which is very important to help establish community trust and strengthen partnerships more widely among tribal representatives. These members may also be Veterans themselves and be able to offer additional support for projects in assisting community Veterans.
4. Maintain personnel continuity, which is critical for building trusting relationships in the Native American communities. Show respect for the community leadership and a willingness to listen, support, and create opportunities.

A change in personnel at any level may mean starting over in partnership building. At a minimum, planning for personnel transitions, (e.g., personal introductions of new staff by departing staff) with tribal colleagues is key for fostering enduring partnerships.

5. Never cancel or delay a meeting or appointment with the tribal representatives. Keeping appointments builds trust and shows your commitment to helping the community and teamwork, as well as the promise to support community.
6. Strive for consistency; hold regular in-person meetings with community members. A community's remoteness may make regular meetings a challenge. Conference calls or teleconferences may help as a substitution with maintaining regular contact with communities, but they should not be replaced by in-person meetings.
7. Allow for flexible meeting durations. Meetings often start late and end late. Often the wait for others to arrive is an opportunity to visit with those who are there. Take this important opportunity to build relationships.

Explore expectations about in-person meetings. Many communities have customs around gift-giving or meals at certain kinds of meetings. In some communities, presentations are expected to be more like storytelling rather than bulleted data on a PowerPoint.

AI/AN Occupational and Training Support

Priority of Service

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) affords priority of service for veterans, including those from the American Indian and Alaska Native population, and their spouses to training, employment, and placement services. In accordance with Section 166 of the WIOA, the Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration (ETA) make funds available to support employment and training activities for Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian individuals that:

- Develop more fully the academic, occupational, and literacy skills of such individuals;
- Make such individuals more competitive in the workforce and to equip them with the entrepreneurial skills necessary for successful self-employment; and
- Promote the economic and social development of Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian communities in accordance with the goals and values of such communities

Further, through the Division of Indian and Native American Programs funding is authorized to support career services and occupational training for adults and youth of the Native American community. The Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development, is the lead Federal agency, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Department of Labor (DOL), the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Education work together obtain funding to support such programs for all federally-recognized tribes and Alaska Native entities.

Indian Preference

Native Americans, beyond their eligibility of being a veteran, may receive ‘Indian Preference’ over non-Indian applicants when applying to jobs with the Indian Health Service and Indian Affairs (including the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Bureau of Indian Education, and some positions within the Assistant Secretary—Indian Affairs).

Indian preference is a unique legal right that tribal members have that entitles them to first consideration at all employment, training, contracting, subcontracting, and business opportunities that exist on, and in some cases, near reservations. There are no federal laws which prohibit Indian Preference.

Preference in filling vacancies is given to qualified Native American candidates in accordance with the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (Title 25, USC, Section 472). If they are claiming Indian Preference, they must submit Form BIA 4432 Verification of Indian Preference with their application. Indian Preference eligibles who are not currently employed in federal service may be appointed under the Excepted Service Appointment Authority Schedule A, 213.3112(a)(7). Consideration will be given to Non-Indian applicants if there are no qualified Indian Preference eligibles.

Online searches allow the use and selection of “Native Americans” as a filter. These results will display all jobs open to Native Americans.

Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP)

OFCCP’s Indian and Native American Employment Rights Program (INAERP) advances awareness of employment rights and job opportunities for American Indians and Alaska Natives who work for or seek employment with companies doing business with the federal government. INAERP accomplishes this mission through compliance assistance and outreach to federal contractors and coordination with tribal representatives, community-based organizations, apprenticeship programs, workforce development agencies, and other federal stakeholders. Through this program, OFCCP has a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Council for Tribal Employment Rights to work together in conducting outreach, education, and compliance assistance activities that promote the recruitment, hiring, retention, and advancement of Indians and Native Americans.

Resources

A number of resources are available to help learn about important history and cultural context that may be critical to know in the planning process. Also, researching a specific community through the web or local library, or asking community partners for learning resources will help.

VA consults with American Indian and Alaska Native tribal governments to develop partnerships that enhance access to services and benefits by Veterans and their families. VA is committed to ensuring that Native American veterans and their families are able to utilize all benefits and services they are entitled to receive.

VA Benefits and Programs for Native American Veterans

Native American veterans may be eligible for a wide variety of benefits available to all U.S. military veterans. VA benefits include disability compensation, pension, education and training, health care, home loans, insurance, vocational rehabilitation and employment, and burial.

Native American Direct Loan (NADL) Program

The NADL program helps eligible Native American veterans finance the purchase, construction, or improvement of homes on Federal Trust Land or reduce the interest rate on such a VA loan. Native American veterans may use these direct loans to simultaneously purchase and improve a home or refinance another VA direct loan made under NADL to lower the interest rate.

Office of Tribal Government Relations

The VA Office of Tribal Government Relations (OTGR) consults with American Indian and Alaska Native tribal governments to develop partnerships that enhance access to services and benefits by veterans and their families. OTGR also sponsors regional training sessions for Tribal leaders, Veteran Service Organizations, and Tribal Organizations to increase access to veteran access to VA healthcare and benefits through informative presentations and interactive discussions.

How to Apply

The specific VA benefit or program web page will provide tailored information about how to apply for a particular benefit or program. Generally, Servicemembers, Veterans, and families can apply for VA benefits using one of the methods below.

- Apply online using eBenefits
- Work with an accredited representative or agent
- Go to a VA regional office and have a VA employee provide assistance. Regional offices can be found via the Facility Locator page.

In the VA, the Native Domain of the Veterans Rural Health Resource Center—Western Region of the Office of Rural Health assists with providing VA facilities, tribes, or organizations working with Native American veterans with information, resources, and technical assistance on

demographics and healthcare services and utilization. Additionally, the Office of Inter-Governmental Relations (OTGR) was established to strengthen tribal relationships with the VA.

The Tribal Veteran Representative (TVR) program provides specialized training to tribal members or others interested in assisting veterans in a tribal community. Comprised mostly of volunteers, these individuals are appointed and supported by the tribe and then participate in training provided by the Office of Rural Health within the VA. TVRs work closely with tribal veterans, community organizations, and local VA offices to support veterans in their community(ies).

Community partnership is increasingly recognized within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) as an important component to bridge gaps among tribal, county, state, and federal services.

A majority of AI/ANs live off reservation and many of those AI/AN veterans utilize the Health Care Access for Urban Native Veterans Act Urban Indian Organizations (UIOs) as an important part of the Indian healthcare delivery system. AI/AN veterans often prefer to use Indian healthcare providers, including UIOs, for reasons such as cultural competency, community and familial relations, and VA wait times.

Hud.gov

The Tribal Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program helps homeless Native American veterans exit homelessness. Tribal HUD-VASH combines rental assistance from HUD with case management, clinical and supportive services provided by VA specifically for Native American veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Other Resources



Refer to Website:

In addition to what's been covered in this overview, there are a number of other resources available at: <https://nvti.org/Resources/Class-Resource>