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THE NAVAJO NATION

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Three Veterans Administration Health Care counselors to provide PTSD services to vets beginning in December

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Navajo veterans who need help for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder will be able to see a Veterans Administration counselor on the Navajo Nation within the week to receive services that could include Navajo ceremonies provided by a VA-employed Navajo medicineman.

The Northern Arizona VA Health Care System has received a new three-year, \$250,000 grant to hire three counselors to provide services for PTSD to Navajo and northern Arizona veterans.

Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., said the counselors are expected to start work in Chinle on Dec. 5 but the official kickoff of the program will be in January 2006. He first announced the new service on Veterans Day in Shiprock.

“So many of our Navajo veterans have received no services at all since returning from combat,” the President said. “It really mentally handicaps a person, leaving them with nightmares and bad feelings. They need something to re-adjust to life as it should be. With this program, they can get it. It is only because of our veterans, our soldiers and their families that we have freedom in the land.”

PTSD is treatable. It begins as a normal response to an extremely abnormal experience such as combat. It can happen to anyone. If the trauma is severe enough, the veteran may chronically re-experience the traumatic events.

Veterans who have served in combat often experience PTSD and commonly develop other conditions such as alcohol use disorder, depression and even suicide.

Deborah A. Thompson, director of Northern Arizona VA Health Care System in Prescott, briefed the President and Vice President Frank Dayish, Jr., on the program in August. She said the counselors will serve the northern part of Arizona, which includes the Navajo Nation and the Hopi Tribe. Two of the counselors are Native American and one, although non-native, has served veterans for years.

“It’s a new thing but it’s very important,” said Anslem Roanhorse, director of the Navajo Nation Division of Health. “This is the first time we’ve ever done this on an interagency basis. We’re going to set the model. Although it’s a three-year grant, we want to make sure that it continues beyond three years.”

Mr. Roanhorse said reports indicate that PTSD affects many veterans returning from the Iraq War to some degree.

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“The studies are showing they’re being very much affected,” he said. “This is a new grant. We certainly can make use of this resource.”

He said the Navajo Division of Health, Indian Health Service, Chinle Vet Center and the VA developed a 10-point action plan to assist in the implementation of the PTSD clinic.

An October 2005 report for the National Indian Health Board says Navajo veterans encounter considerable difficulty when seeking VA health care services because they are often located great distances from their homes.

For more than 30 years, Navajo veterans have expressed the need for VA health care services. Proposals have resulted in a small number of programs for Navajo veterans over the years.

The new grant comes from the U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs Mental Health Strategic Healthcare Group. Its purpose is to expand existing services for vets suffering from PTSD in northeastern Arizona. It will expand services now offered in Chinle, Keams Canyon, Bellemont and Cottonwood.

The Northern Arizona VA Health Care System plan is to create an outreach team that will visit the Navajo and Hopi nations on a regular basis. The program will provide three social workers trained in PTSD care to provide group, individual and family counseling to assist in PTSD therapy.

The group treatment will teach social skills and cognitive behavioral methods of self-management of symptoms. The Northern Arizona VA Health Care System will work collaboratively with tribes to integrate spiritual, cultural and family support for the veterans treated.

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ADDITIONAL SOURCES

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