



**JOE SHIRLEY, JR.**  
*President*

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*Vice-President*

## THE NAVAJO NATION

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### **Navajo President Joe Shirley, Jr., Veterans Administration, Chinle Hospital, Chinle Vet Center launches PTSD Program**

**CHINLE, Ariz.** – Navajo and Hopi veterans of northern Arizona will now receive the counseling, services and traditional ceremonies they may need to help them re-adjust to civilian life after the traumatic stress of combat or military service.

On Wednesday, Jan. 18, the Northern Arizona Veterans Administration Health Care System officially launched its expansion of services for the Navajo and Hopi nations with a dedication at the Chinle Community Center.

“This was a long day coming,” said Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., one of several speakers to address the 150 vets, their families, friends and officials who gathered to honor those who served in the military. “I feel that it should have happened a long time ago.”

President Shirley acknowledged the service of hundreds of Navajo veterans going back to World War II, noting that many have never been recognized for their selfless service nor received the benefits they are entitled to. In many cases, he said, they may not have received a Navajo ceremony to help them to adjust to life after combat.

“In some cases there is irreparable harm done to their minds,” Dr. Shirley said. “We’re indebted to you. Now I can safely say there’s going to be some help for them.”

The President said that because of a lack of available services until now, the Navajo Nation and numerous families have lost their veterans to alcohol and substance abuse – often a symptom of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.



***President Shirley with the three counselors who will serve Navajo and Hopi veterans. From left to right they are team leader Diana Spurlock, Geri Bahe-Hernandez and Michelle Kierstead. To reach them call 928-674-1223 or 928-674-1143.***

Now, he said, working with traditional healers and herbalists, there are ways to help better the lives of Navajo servicemen and women returning from hazardous duty.

“It has to be that way,” Dr. Shirley said. “Other ways don’t work. Working together is how this program came to be and that’s how it should be.”

In a historic partnership between the Navajo Nation, the Chinle Comprehensive Health Care Facility, the

Northern Arizona VA Health Care System, and the Chinle Veterans Outreach Center, PTSD services will be offered to veterans living in northeastern Arizona from the Chinle Veteran Outreach Center by VA providers.

Services began on Dec. 5, 2005, are available in Chinle and are open to all eligible veterans.

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.

The Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Treatment Expansion Program is being funded through a new three-year, \$250,000 grant, which has been used to hire three counselors to provide services for PTSD to Navajo and northern Arizona veterans.



***The Chinle High School ROTC Drill Team performed an incredible display of timing and skill during the program. The Drill Team members performing were Cadet Lieutenant Kendrick Curley, Cadet Private Matthew Claw, Cadet Lieutenant Charles Uentillie, Cadet Master Sergeant Bianca Sansosie, Cadet Master Sergeant Tamara Chischilly, Cadet Private Phil Chischilly, Jr., Cadet Master Sergeant Harlan Tso, Cadet Private Byron Joe, Cadet Sergeant First Class Ronnie Curley, team commander Cadet Captain Wilma Crosby. The Chinle High ROTC is commanded by Major Rail and Master Sergeant Gary Collier.***

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 expanded program allows veterans to see a counselor to receive services that could include Navajo ceremonies provided by a VA-employed Navajo medicineman, Albert Laughter.

Anselm Roanhorse, director of the Navajo Division of Health, said he was grateful that the resources were found to be able to provide the services for veterans.

“Through partnership and collaboration, the Navajo Division of Health Department of Behavioral Services is ready to offer its services, as well as traditional healing services,” he said. “This shows that by working together, much-needed services can be realized.”

Dr. David Fero of NAVAHCS, who is credited with seeking the grant, told the audience at the dedication that veterans have paid a high price in the decline of their health to serve the country, and some are still paying it.

“Many don’t understand what is happening in their lives,” he said. “They may experience horror, dreams, unwanted flashbacks or just be unable to interact with others.”

He said some symptoms of PTSD are being overly-vigilant, disillusionment, loss of hope, or withdrawal from family and community.

“Many lose their self-esteem,” he said. “But with understanding, there can be hope and help.”

He said that with the assistance of the expanded program and the care of family, vets can transition from military life back into society and function well again. They can experience reduced anxiety and develop coping skills.

Ron Tso, CEO of the Chinle Comprehensive Health Care Facility, which is working with the VA to provide the program, noted that it’s really a veteran who really understands what veterans have gone through.

Farrell Udell, director of the VA’s Readjustment Counseling Service in Santa Fe, N.M., said that never before have so many veterans from so many wars needed so many services. He said that all of these age populations have converged at the same time.

“If we all want to work to care for our veterans, this program will work,” he said.

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.

**For information or to contact a counselor, call 800-949-1005 or the NAVAHCS counselors at 928-674-1223 or 928-674-1143.**

**The number for the Chinle Vet Center is 928-674-3685, 674-5630, or 674-3682.  
The toll-free number is 888-707-6790.**

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#### **ADDITIONAL SOURCES**

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