

# VA-Indian Health Service Partnership



**The American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Veteran population experiences significant health disparities compared to other Veteran groups.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Indian Health Service (IHS) are federal organizations that provide health care to AI/AN Veterans and work to overcome the unique challenges this population faces.**

VA and IHS partner to maximize resources and deliver an integrated approach that supports the health and well-being of AI/AN Veterans. This partnership was formalized with a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on October 1, 2010.<sup>2</sup> The goal of the MOU is "to improve the health status of American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans" through five mutual actions:

- ▶ Increase access and quality of care for AI/AN Veterans
- ▶ Improve health-promotion and disease-prevention
- ▶ Encourage patient-centered collaboration and communication
- ▶ Consult with tribes at the regional and local levels
- ▶ Ensure appropriate resources for services for AI/AN Veterans

VA's Office of Rural Health (ORH), VA's Office of Tribal Government Relations and IHS form the National Leadership Team responsible for implementing the MOU. The organizations collaborate on care coordination, health care services, reimbursement, and workforce training and cultural competency.

## Overcoming Health Disparities

The AI/AN population experiences health and other disparities that affect their quality of life. AI/AN Veterans have an average life expectancy four years shorter than that of the general U.S. population and are at significantly higher risk of chronic illness.<sup>3</sup> AI/AN Veterans are also more likely to experience social and economic difficulties that may impact their health or wellness, such as lower income, lower education levels, and higher unemployment than Veterans of other races or ethnicities. Additionally, AI/AN Veterans are more likely to lack health insurance and to have a disability—service-connected or otherwise.<sup>1</sup>

IHS provides health services to an AI/AN population of more than 2.2 million, who belong to 566 federally recognized tribes in 35 states. Additionally, VA supports programs that use telehealth technology, culturally sensitive community outreach and other innovative strategies to increase AI/AN Veterans' access to care.

An estimated 177,000 AI/AN Veterans live in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

## Payment and Reimbursement

In fiscal year 2015, 5,000 Veterans (a 32 percent increase from the previous year) were served through the reimbursement program that allows eligible AI/AN Veterans to receive care closer to home.

## Successes

VA, IHS and their tribal partners continue to make progress so that AI/AN Veterans thrive in rural communities.

- ▶ **Clinical Safety Efforts:** Eight IHS facilities added the Bar Code Medication Administration program developed by VA to increase patient safety and avoid medication loss.
- ▶ **Pharmacy:** More than 1.4 million prescriptions were processed through the VA Consolidated Mail Outpatient Pharmacy program since fiscal year 2010, allowing AI/AN Veterans to receive their prescriptions at home.
- ▶ **Continuing Education for Care Providers:** VA and IHS offered more than 300 shared Continuing Medical Education credit opportunities for VA and IHS care providers since 2013.
- ▶ **Health Information Exchange and New Technology:** VA and IHS successfully tested direct, secure, provider-to-provider messaging capabilities for care coordination, and increasingly used telehealth programs to overcome geographic barriers and provider shortages in rural areas.

<sup>1</sup> VA Office of Tribal Government Relations. "American Indian and Alaska Native Servicemembers and Veterans." September 2012.

<sup>2</sup> VA-IHS MOU: [www.va.gov/TRIBALGOVERNMENT/docs/Signed2010VA-IHSMOU\\_r.pdf](http://www.va.gov/TRIBALGOVERNMENT/docs/Signed2010VA-IHSMOU_r.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> IHS Disparities Fact Sheet: <https://www.ihs.gov/newsroom/factsheets/disparities/>.

<sup>4</sup> VA Veteran Population Projection Model, 2015.

# Office of Rural Health

The Office of Rural Health (ORH) implements a targeted, solution-driven approach to increase access to care for the 3 million Veterans living in rural communities who rely on the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for health care. As VA's lead advocate for rural Veterans, ORH works to see that America's Veterans thrive in rural communities. To accomplish this, ORH leverages its resources to increase rural Veterans' access to care and services. To learn more, visit [www.ruralhealth.va.gov](http://www.ruralhealth.va.gov).



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