

Research: Diabetes Among Veterans

Like the Elders who have Diabetes, Elderly Veterans are another segment of the American Indian population with a high need that is unmet. Their need is equally pervasive, affecting all parts of their lives. While many Veterans suffer, the suffering of American Indian Veterans is often above the norm. Why is this? The everyday circumstances of their lives can be desperate independent of war – for reasons ranging from deep poverty and isolation on the reservations to prejudice and lack of access to the best of the US. And yet they served this country.



The Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that 185,000 American Indians are Veterans. They served in World Wars I and II and the Korean, Vietnam, and Persian Gulf conflicts and continue to serve in Iraq. Many of the American Indian Veterans are now Elders; and many are just “old before their time” due to the ravages of war and its long-term effects. For instance, it is known that Native Americans exposed to Agent Orange are more likely to get adult-onset Type II Diabetes than non-Natives. They are also more likely to have nervous system damage from Agent Orange and DMZ (demilitarized zone) action, which can contribute to onset or instability of Diabetes. [Sources: www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_editions/005684.html, as well as www.atsdr.cdc.gov/cabs/dioxins/#effect and www.va.gov/OCA/testimony/svac/030710DC.asp]

According to the Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS), “Veterans are nearly three times as likely as the general population to have diabetes ... Among Veterans receiving V.A. health care, the rate is 20 percent.” [Source: www.hhs.gov/news/press/2006pres/20060227.html, released Feb 27, 2006.]

So we see that 1 in 5 Veterans have Diabetes and that American Indians are almost 2.5 times more likely to have Diabetes than other ethnic groups. Couple these – and the news for American Indian Veterans is not good. [Source: http://democrats.senate.gov/dpc/dpc_new.cfm?doc_name=sr-108-2-257, published Sept. 27, 2004]

Researchers at the Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System reported that the odds for American Indian Elders (age 65 and over) are even worse – at 2.8 times the norm for other groups. (This figure may be higher now.) [Source: www1.va.gov/opa/feature/vanguard/01novVG.pdf, published Nov. 2001]

Also contributing to their plight are the often desperate circumstances of American Indians even before they are called to war. The V.A. sums it up this way:

[American Indian] veterans have experienced problems in accessing care, receiving appropriate care, and coordinating care within the V.A. healthcare system. Lack of information regarding eligibility for services, lack of affordable transportation, costs, excessive wait times, paperwork, and delayed access to needed services have all contributed to difficulties for [American Indians] seeking treatment at the V.A. Adding to the lack of access is a lack of knowledge about what services and benefits are available. Many veterans reported not knowing what services exist, where services can be obtained, and whether they are eligible for those services. Native American veterans show high levels of PTSD ... Diabetes ... and conditions that require ongoing medical management. Therefore, lack of access or delayed access to needed medical care has the potential to render an [already] at-risk population vulnerable to myriad complications associated with these [medical] conditions.

[Source: www.hsr.d.research.va.gov/research/abstracts.cfm?Project_ID=-1927724230&UnderReview=no]

The same can be said to apply to all other aspects of life for these Veterans. To their food. To their housing. To their family needs. To life in general. American Indian Veterans like Jimmy Casemero, Glenn Thompson, and Willie Antone will agree. In fact, life can be so hard that the actual life expectancy of American Indian men is 6 years below the US average. And on the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Reservations (in SD), the life expectancy for American Indian men is the lowest in the entire Western Hemisphere (except for men on Haiti).

[Source: http://democrats.senate.gov/dpc/dpc-new.cfm?doc_name=sr-108-2-257, published Sept 27, 2004.]

Just having access to healthy food could make a big difference for the American Indian Veterans who served all of us by going to war – some whose lives are hard with or without Diabetes.