

## **WALKING SHIELD: Bringing Healthcare to Reservations in Need**

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January, 2003, National Congress of American Indians President Tex Hall presented the first ever State of Indian Nations address. His address focused on three major concerns, "our future survival as independent, self-governing people; our ability to move out of poverty and unemployment to meaningful development in our economies; and the well-being and quality of life of American Indian and Alaska Native people in this nation for the next seven generations to come." In his speech, Hall stated, "Per capita expenditure for American Indian and Alaska Native medical services is less than that for federal prisoners." This is cause for alarm amongst our Native communities. Although this statistic is appalling, it also poses the question, "what can be done to bring about a change in these statistics?"

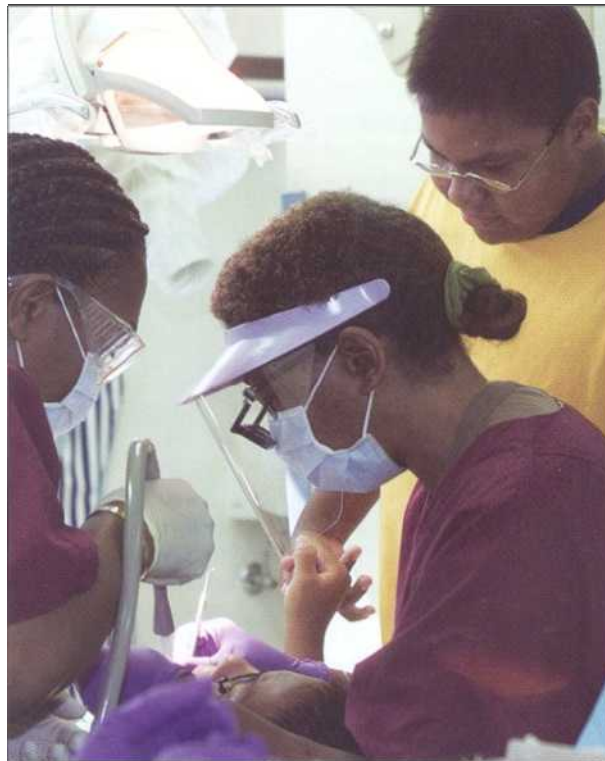
The Indian Health Service (IHS), was created in 1955 as a branch of the Health, Education and Welfare Department (now known as the Department of Health and Human Services) to handle healthcare on reservations. The current level of federal funding is barely able to meet the critical health care problems still existing on many reservations. Even more debilitating, little manpower or funding is left for preventative care, the key to healthier future generations. Without addressing preventative care, it becomes nearly impossible to change the current health problem, creating a vicious circle. This subsequently produces an overburdened healthcare system on reservations, with ever increasing populations.

As Indian gaming has become the cornerstone to economic development for many tribes, there is a growing humanitarian spirit that rises above state compacts and the

benefits of gaming for local communities. This spirit reaches farther and embraces less fortunate reservations. It is passed on through philanthropic giving. An example of this giving is the Aqua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians and

the Pechanga Band of Luiseflo Mission Indians of Southern California, who have given above and beyond the percentage required by the state compacts.

One of the programs benefiting from this movement is the Walking Shield American Indian Society's Medical and Dental Healthcare Program. Through this program, Walking Shield coordinates the logistics with impoverished tribes and the United States military. Together they bring medical and dental services to reservations badly in need of alleviating a growing backlog of patients with a variety of healthcare needs. Walking Shield works to bring together two cultures that traditionally have not been in partnership. Through the facilitation of this partnership, the tribes receive much needed



medical and dental service while the military medical teams utilize their skills, thus enhancing their readiness for deployment.

The value of this program is evidenced throughout reservations across the United States. "The [Walking Shield] program is now firmly imbedded in the Rosebud IHS solution of healthcare delivery against a background of immense disease burden and significant resource limitation," as stated in a final report to the Department of Health and Human Service in January of 2003, by Timothy W Ryschon, M.D., Clinical Director, Rosebud IHS. Another example of success in alleviating patient backlogs was surpassed at the

Sac and Fox Nation of Missouri in Kansas and Missouri in the summer of 2003. Chairperson Sandra Keo observed, "This is the first time this has happened to the tribes in this area. Expectations have been exceeded, the projected 40 patients *a day* could be seen and often that figure was surpassed."

Along with the tribe's satisfaction, the military also has benefited through participation in the program. "This is a fantastic opportunity for us and we are able to give back to the community," said Captain Rex Monif of Tekamah, Nebraska, who is also the dental director of the Omaha Tribe of Macy, Nebraska. In addition to the satisfaction of giving back to the communities, the military is able to utilize their skills. "This is an opportunity for our soldiers to work with the equipment," commented Captain Monif. These missions on the reservations ready our troops by providing a real-life backdrop to prepare them for deployment to conflicts around the world, including the current war in Iraq. In essence, the tribes are helping our military personnel by allowing them to utilize their skills as teams on the reservations.

This is only one example of the humanitarian, educational and economic development that generous gaming tribes are funding. As with most non-profits, it is the partnerships with the corporate community that afford opportunities to provide needed social services above and beyond what the current level of federal and state programs can handle. Corporations that contribute to the non-profit sector allow programs that benefit humanity to continue with their missions. As tribal gaming revenue continues to provide the opportunity to improve quality of life, the Indian community becomes better as a whole. Without the gaming donations, programs such as Walking Shield's medical and dental healthcare programs would not exist.

A quote by Oliver Wendall Holmes, Jr. aptly states, "A man's mind stretched by a new idea can never go back to its original dimensions."

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