

Army Reserve dentists take skills to reservation as part of free clinic

[By Erin Adamson](#)

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John Ferrari consulted a dentist for the first time last week without having to leave the Prairie Band Potawatomi Reservation in Jackson County, where he has lived since childhood.

There isn't a dental clinic on the reservation, and Ferrari said that poses a problem for many residents, especially the elderly.

But dentists with the U.S. Army Reserve 912th Medical Company's Dental Program are offering free dental care to tribe members -- including six teeth extractions on Ferrari -- as part of a field clinic at the Reservation that opened June 15 and will continue until Thursday.

"I really appreciate them coming out here," Ferrari said. "We'd like to have them come back."

Ferrari said although he served as a combat engineer in the Army, his veteran's benefits wouldn't have covered the tooth extractions he received for free at the clinic.

Col. Ellis Thigpen said more than 200 tribe members had received fillings, root canals and cleanings -- any dental care that didn't require laboratory tests, which aren't available at the portable clinic. Thigpen said members of the tribal council had asked to be a site for the training clinic.



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Dental assistant Sgt. Rhonda Johnson, of the 325th Field Hospital Army Reserve unit, helps Capt. David Whitaker of the 912th medical company's dental program unit extract six teeth from Potawatomi tribe member John Ferrari during Monday's dental clinic at the reservation.

Jon Boursaw, executive director of tribal government, said the clinic was a "tremendous benefit" to people living on the reservation.

For the six dentists and seven dental assistants at work Monday in the basement of the reservation's Nation Senior Center, the clinic is a training mission that prepares them to work in an emergency medical situation. The unit brought everything needed for a clinic, including portable generators, from its post in Independence.

Sgt. Rhonda Johnson, a member of the 325th field hospital, of Independence, asked to work at the clinic because she spent her childhood summers living on the reservation with her father and stepmother, a tribe member, and hadn't visited since 1995.

"There's a lot of people here I know," Johnson said.

Johnson, who works in her civilian job as a dental assistant in Kansas City, Kan., said many patients thanked the soldiers providing them with dental care.

The Army also conducted a training clinic in a gymnasium on the Sac-and-Fox Reservation near Hiawatha earlier this spring, where dentists treated about 500 tribe members, Thigpen said.

Zach Pahmahmie, tribal council chairman, said Potawatomi tribe members can seek medical attention at Indian Health Services in Holton, but most people who need dental work are sent to a clinic at Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence.

School-aged children sometimes are referred to private practices in Topeka, he said.

Boursaw said the tribe was in the planning stages of establishing a health center that would provide comprehensive care, a pharmacy and house existing social services.

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Col. Ellis Thigpen

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