

OPERATION WALKING SHIELD "FITTING RIGHT IN"

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By Dani. Marchand
Journal Staff Reporter

The second phase of Operation Walking Shield is being implemented on the Spirit Lake Nation. Currently, the, 349th medical reserve squadron from Travis Air Force" Base, Fairfield, Calif., is "fitting right in" with staff at the Spirit Lake Health Center, according to Jim Foote, CEO.

Walking Shield America Indian Society, Inc., a California-based organization, incorporates military assistance to help improve the quality of Native American life. The organization was, active with Spirit Lake in 2001, utilizing National Guard members to establish renovated airforce base duplexes to help with housing shortages.

This year, the organization is focusing on medical health. Fifteen squadron members, consisting of a dentist, doctor, dietitian, three nurses, two emergency medical technicians, lab and pharmacy technicians, and administrative Personnel, are assisting health center staff in any way they can.

The assistance of the reservists is greatly appreciated, he said, especially with their current shortage of healthcare professionals. Foote said the center was "short a dentist and we put him to work as soon as he walked in the door. "They really benefit the staff. On the first day they were here, last Monday, we had an enormous amount of patients and they just went to work. The staff is really happy to have them here."

"The primary mission is to augment our services and provide quality healthcare," Foote said.

"It's just a really neat partnership and a team effort," he said.

Even though many of the squadron had never been on a reservation before, Foote said they all have been "culturally sensitive" and are having "a real wonderful time helping and having fun. And we are too."

But it isn't just about fun. The squadron under the command of Lt. Col. Cynthia Facekas, is serious about their assignment and fill in wherever there is a need. Soldiers have been helping with health education and have been pitching in to help develop a bioterrorism plan.

Tribal officials have been very, supportive of the program and have been working in partnership to ensure its success. Tribal' Chairman Skip Longie, Health Board Director Peggy Cavanaugh, and Rosalie Baer, Judi Ami and Sonta Dauphanias, members of the Health board have been instrumental in bringing the Walking Shield project to Spirit Lake.

The 349th, who have been living at Camp Grafton on during their stay, will be departing Spirit Lake this week. Four new squadrons will be arriving throughout the summer, each in two week increments, pending world events. Work currently is being coordinated to obtain assistance into 2004, according to Sheri Shaffer, Spirit Lake Health Center PI coordinator.

Schaffer said the program is needed. "There are shortages of healthcare providers, especially in Indian healthcare clinics."

"These Walking Shield missions have been going on in Rosebud but this is the first time here. We're really pleased," she said.

"They're augmenting our services, and we're short staffed as it is. We're thrilled to have the addition of such quality staff to provide quality healthcare," Foote said.