



September 2013

NATIVE AMERICAN VETERANS

DOL Needs a Clear Plan to Improve Employment and Training Services on Tribal Lands

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-13-664](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The unemployment rate for all veterans has risen since the beginning of the economic downturn, but the unemployment rate for Native Americans living on tribal land has been higher. In addition, tribal land is frequently located in remote areas characterized by limited economic development, which can make finding a job challenging. DOL administers several grant programs that provide employment assistance to all eligible veterans, including Native Americans. In response to a statutory mandate, in October 2010, DOL submitted a report to Congress recommending that the agency take actions to increase employment and training opportunities for Native American veterans living on tribal lands. GAO assessed (1) the status of DOL efforts to implement the report's recommendations and (2) whether and how DOL can improve on its efforts to implement the report's recommendations. GAO reviewed federal laws, regulations, and DOL guidance; interviewed DOL, state, and tribal officials as well as Native American veterans; and conducted site visits to tribal lands in four U.S. regions.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOL develop a written strategy to implement the 2010 recommendations that incorporates roles and responsibilities, goals, costs, and time frames. DOL should also expand collaboration with other agencies to leverage resources and identify and disseminate lessons learned from prior relevant efforts. DOL agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-13-664](#). For more information, contact Andrew Sherrill at (202) 512-7215 or sherrilla@gao.gov.

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DOL Needs a Clear Plan to Improve Employment and Training Services on Tribal Lands

What GAO Found

The Department of Labor (DOL) is in the early stages of implementing several of the 2010 report's recommendations, but implementation of the remaining recommendations has not occurred. The agency has begun to take steps to respond to three of the report's six recommendations: improve interagency collaboration, create an advisory subcommittee for Native American veterans, and conduct a needs assessment. To increase collaboration, DOL has conducted several listening sessions with tribal leadership and begun collaborating with agencies that serve veterans, including the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs, to learn more about how to better serve Native American veterans. With regard to an advisory subcommittee, DOL is developing a proposal to establish a subgroup for Native American veterans on its existing veterans' employment and training advisory committee, and is considering appointing a representative from the Native American veterans' community to serve on that committee. To assess need, DOL has identified a potential source for data within DOD that provides race and ethnicity and address information for returning veterans that could help better target visits to tribal land, but its plans to acquire these data are still being negotiated and could take time to finalize. However, DOL has taken little to no action on recommendations to increase outreach, pursue program flexibility, and boost economic development. DOL officials told us that leadership transitions and budget challenges have contributed to their limited response to date. In addition, since delivering the report in 2010, DOL has not developed a strategy that specifically establishes roles and responsibilities, goals, costs, and time frames for implementation of the report's recommendations.

Recommendations from 2010 DOL Report, Employment Needs of Native American Veterans Living on Tribal Lands



Source: GAO analysis of *Employment Needs of Native American Veterans Living on Tribal Land*, U.S. Department of Labor, Washington, D.C., 2010.

DOL could build on its efforts to implement the report's recommendations, even in a constrained budget environment. For example, DOL could expand the collaboration it has begun with other agencies that serve Native American veterans on tribal land, such as the Department of Education (Education). GAO site visits indicated that some Native American veterans received employment services from a vocational rehabilitation program administered by Education. DOL can consider partnering with this program. DOL could also identify and disseminate lessons learned from states that have collaborated with other agencies and tribal governments. For example, a DOL program in Montana has leveraged other agency resources, such as collaborating with the VA Vet Center to provide both health and employment services to Native American veterans in remote tribal areas using mobile units, an approach that may be applicable in other states. To boost economic development, DOL could review information from its existing grants and guidance on economic development to disseminate to DOL grantees that serve Native American veterans.

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Abbreviations

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| ACVETEO | Advisory Committee on Veterans' Employment, Training and Employer Outreach |
| BIA | Bureau of Indian Affairs |
| DINAP | Division of Indian and Native American Programs |
| DMDC | Defense Manpower Data Center |
| DOD | Department of Defense |
| DOI | Department of the Interior |
| DOL | Department of Labor |
| DVET | Director for Veterans' Employment and Training |
| DVOP | Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program |
| ETA | Employment and Training Administration |
| HHS | Department of Health and Human Services |
| JVSG | Jobs for Veterans State Grants |
| LVER | Local Veterans' Employment Representative |
| SBA | Small Business Administration |
| TAACCCT | Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training |
| TANF | Temporary Assistance for Needy Families |
| TAP | Transition Assistance Program |
| VA | Department of Veterans Affairs |
| VETS | Veterans' Employment and Training Service |
| WIA | Workforce Investment Act of 1998 |

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September 26, 2013

Congressional Requesters

Native Americans historically have shown a higher rate of military service than other ethnic groups. There are currently more than 150,000 Native American veterans—some of whom reside on tribal land.¹ Tribal land is frequently located in remote, rural areas characterized by limited economic development, which can make finding a job especially challenging. The unemployment rate for all veterans has risen since the beginning of the economic downturn—from 3.8 percent in 2007 to 8.7 percent in 2010—and based on the limited data, the unemployment rate for Native Americans living on tribal land has been higher.²

A range of federal programs provide employment assistance that can serve veterans of any race or ethnicity; in addition, other federal programs

¹ In this report, the term “Native Americans” refers to American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians. We use the term “tribal land” to refer to Indian reservations, Alaska Native villages, and Hawaiian Home Lands. More specifically, for the purposes of this report, we define (1) an Indian reservation as land established by treaty, statute, executive order, or administrative procedure for the use of a designated tribe or tribes, (2) an Alaska Native village as a village that (a) was deemed eligible as a Native village under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (Pub. L. No. 92-203, 85 Stat. 688 (1971)) and (b) has a corresponding Alaska Native entity that is recognized by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and (3) Hawaiian Home Lands as land areas that were originally established under the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act, 1920 (Pub. L. No. 67-34, 42 Stat. 108 (1921)) and are now held in trust by the state of Hawaii for the benefit of Native Hawaiians. Hawaiian Home Lands are owned by the state of Hawaii and there is no separate Native Hawaiian entity governing the land. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2011 approximately 150,000 individuals identified themselves as Native American veterans. This includes only individuals who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native alone and not in combination with another racial group. Therefore, it likely underestimates the number of Native American veterans.

² U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Office of Indian Services, *2005 American Indian Population and Labor Force Report*. BIA’s American Indian Population and Labor Force Report is the only regularly collected source of poverty and unemployment data on all U.S. reservations. The Indian Employment, Training and Related Services Demonstration Act of 1992 requires the Secretary of the Interior to develop, maintain, and publish not less than biennially, a report on the population eligible for services provided by the Secretary to Indian people, including information by gender, age, availability for work, and employment. Pub. L. No. 102-477, § 17(a), 106 Stat. 2302, 2305 (codified at 25 U.S.C. § 3416(a)). However, the 2005 report is the most recent year these data were collected. See Preparation of the 2013 American Indian Population and Labor Force Report, 77 Fed. Reg. 61,780 (Oct. 11, 2012).

offer similar services to Native Americans (veterans and non-veterans alike). The Department of Labor's (DOL) Veterans' Employment and Training Service administers several grant programs to support eligible veterans through the Jobs for Veterans State Grants Program.

The Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2008 required DOL to assess and report on the employment needs of Native American veterans living on tribal lands, including Indian reservations, Alaska Native villages, and Hawaiian Home Lands.³ In October 2010, DOL submitted to Congress its final report committing to address six recommendations (which we describe further in appendix II) to:

1. collaborate with federal and state agencies and tribal governments;
2. conduct outreach to Native American veterans living on tribal lands;
3. complete an assessment of Native American veterans' employment needs;
4. create flexibility among existing employment programs to better meet the needs of Native American veterans;
5. create an advisory committee subgroup on Native American veteran employment issues; and
6. boost economic development on tribal lands.

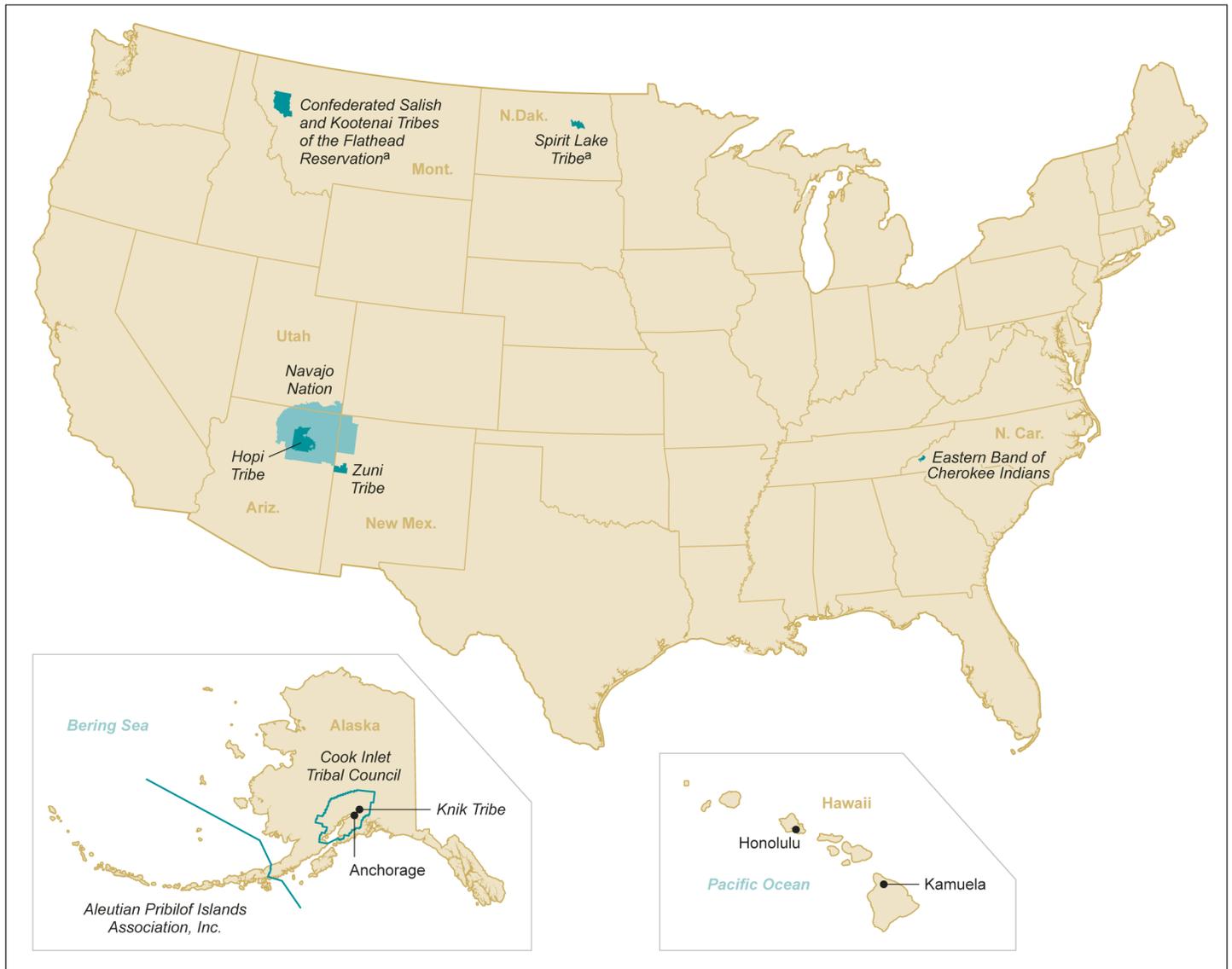
To address your interest in DOL's actions on each of these recommendations since the agency delivered its report to Congress, we examined the following: 1) the status of DOL efforts to implement recommendations in its 2010 report on employment services and training opportunities for Native American veterans on tribal lands; and 2) whether and how DOL can improve on its efforts to implement the report's recommendations.

To determine the implementation status of all the report's recommendations, we reviewed the 2010 report and conducted semi-structured interviews with officials from the DOL. We also conducted interviews with officials from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)

³ Pub. L. No. 110-389, § 314, 122 Stat. 4145, 4167. Under section 314 of the Act, the term "Native American" includes American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander. However, in this report we use the term "Native American" to refer to only American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians.

Office of Tribal Government Relations, and the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). To identify opportunities for improvement, we conducted semi-structured interviews with officials from DOL and VA; and in selected states, federal Jobs for Veterans State Grants Program directors, state workforce officials, Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program specialists and Local Veterans' Employment Representatives, tribal workforce and veterans officials, as well as tribal volunteers who educate veterans about available benefits. We also conducted discussion groups with Native American veterans, tribal program administrators, and federal agency officials at the National Congress of American Indians Annual Convention in October 2012 and the VA Eastern Region Training Summit in May 2013. To better understand the current status of DOL's programs with regard to Native American veterans on tribal land, we visited four areas, meeting with multiple groups in each location: (1) Arizona and New Mexico (Navajo Nation and the Hopi and Zuni Tribes); (2) North Carolina (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians); (3) Alaska; and (4) Hawaii. We also conducted phone interviews with officials of tribes in Montana (the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation) and North Dakota (the Spirit Lake Tribe). See figure 1. We selected Native American communities to represent a range of geographic dispersion, estimated Native American population and unemployment rate, and presence of DOL programs in a given community.

Figure 1: Locations of Site Visits and Telephone Contacts for GAO Study



Source: GAO analysis of site selection criteria; National Atlas of the United States.

^aWe conducted phone interviews with tribal program administrators with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation in Montana and the Spirit Lake Tribe in North Dakota. We did not visit these locations.

During our site visits, we met with tribal leaders and officials and held discussion groups with 59 American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian veterans. In addition, we conducted semi-structured telephone

interviews with federal Jobs for Veterans State Grants Program (JVSG) directors in Arizona, Alaska, Hawaii, New Mexico, Montana, North Dakota, and Washington state, as well as JVSG staff, state officials in these states and officials of tribes in Montana (the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation) and North Dakota (the Spirit Lake Tribe).⁴

We reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, DOL guidance, and supporting documentation for selected existing DOL grants to Native American entities. In addition, we conducted semi-structured interviews with relevant associations, experts, and other stakeholders, including the National Association of State Workforce Agencies, and National American Indian Veterans. Appendix I provides a more detailed list of groups we interviewed. We conducted our review from September 2012 to September 2013 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Native American Veteran Population and Tribal Lands

In 2011, there were an estimated 150,000 Native American veterans, representing less than 1 percent of the entire veteran population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.⁵ Additionally, according to a VA report that analyzed Census Bureau data, American Indian and Alaska Native veterans were significantly more likely to be unemployed, as

⁴ We selected the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation in Montana using the same criteria that was used to select the site visits. The Spirit Lake Tribe in North Dakota was selected to learn more about outreach activities conducted by a North Dakota Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program specialist for Native American veterans identified by DOL.

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, *2011 American Community Survey 1-year estimates*. These data represent only those veterans who reported a single race of American Indian or Alaska Native, and do not include American Indian or Alaska Native in combination with any other race, nor do they include Native Hawaiian veterans. Therefore, this estimate likely underestimates the number of Native American veterans.

compared to all other veterans.⁶ The states with the largest numbers of American Indian and Alaska Native veterans were, in descending order, California, Oklahoma, Arizona, and New Mexico; Alaska had the highest proportion of Native Americans among its veteran population.

Tribal lands vary dramatically in type, size, and demographics.⁷ For the purposes of this report, we define tribal lands to include Indian reservations, Alaska Native villages, and Hawaiian Home Lands.⁸ They range in size from the Navajo Nation, with a population of over 176,000 American Indian residents spread out over an area of about 24,000 square miles, to some tribal lands with fewer than 50 Indian residents or an area of less than 1 square mile. In addition, most tribal lands are rural or remote, although some are near metropolitan areas. Communities located on tribal land also often lack basic infrastructure, such as water and sewer systems, and sufficient technology infrastructure, such as telecommunications lines that are commonly found in other American communities. Additionally, in 2008, the Census Bureau reported that American Indians and Alaska Natives had almost twice as high a percentage living in poverty compared with other Americans—27 percent compared with 15 percent. While Native Americans reside in every state, the Census Bureau estimated in 2012 that about 20 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives live on tribal lands⁹ and that 16 percent of Native Hawaiians live on Hawaiian Home Lands.¹⁰

The federal government has recognized many American Indian tribes and Alaska Native populations as distinct, independent political communities with inherent governmental powers of limited sovereignty. The United States has a trust responsibility to recognized tribes and maintains a

⁶ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, *American Indian and Alaska Native Servicemembers and Veterans* (September 2012). This study analyzed data from the 2010 American Community Survey.

⁷ See GAO, *Indian Issues: Observations on Some Unique Factors that May Affect Economic Activity on Tribal Land*, [GAO-11-543T](#), (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 7, 2011).

⁸ Both DOL's 2010 report and the law that required it defined tribal lands to include: Indian reservations, Alaska Native villages, and Hawaiian Home Lands.

⁹ For this estimate, the Census Bureau defined tribal land as including federal reservation and off-reservation trust land and other federal- or state-designated Indian statistical areas.

¹⁰ These estimates were based on data from the 2010 census.

government-to-government relationship with those tribes.¹¹ Since 1979, BIA has regularly published a list of federally recognized Indian tribes in the Federal Register.

As of May 2013, there were 566 federally recognized tribes, including 225 in Alaska.¹² By contrast, Native Hawaiians do not have federal recognition or a government-to-government relationship with the United States. However, some federal grant programs target Native Hawaiians as a group, in some cases along with other populations.¹³

Federal Programs Serving Native American Veterans, Among Other Groups

Native American veterans can be served by a range of employment- and training-related federal programs that are administered by DOL and other agencies (see fig. 2 for selected examples). Within DOL, two organizations administer programs that serve Native American veterans: the Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS), and the Division of Indian and Native American Programs (DINAP). VETS has responsibility for a number of programs that serve veterans. Among these is the Jobs for Veterans State Grants program (JVSG).¹⁴ Services funded through the JVSG program are available to all eligible veterans, including those with disabilities and other barriers to employment. JVSG grants provide funding to states to support two types of staff positions, Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program specialists (DVOPs) and Local Veterans' Employment Representatives (LVERs), who are generally employees of

¹¹ The federal Indian trust responsibility is a legal obligation under which the United States "has charged itself with moral obligations of the highest responsibility and trust" toward Indian tribes. *Seminole Nation v. United States*, 316 U.S. 286, 297 (1942). The federal government has a trust relationship to the tribe and its members and specific obligations to provide benefits and services to the tribe and its members.

¹² Indian Entities Recognized and Eligible To Receive Services From the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs, 78 Fed. Reg. 26,384 (May 6, 2013).

¹³ Federal programs may have different definitions of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian for purposes of determining eligibility.

¹⁴ 38 U.S.C. §§ 4103a, 4104. In addition to the JVSG program, VETS also administers programs to enforce veterans' re-employment rights under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act of 1994; to provide services to meet the workforce investment needs of certain veterans, through the Veterans' Workforce Investment Program; and to expedite the reintegration of homeless veterans into the labor force, through the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration program.

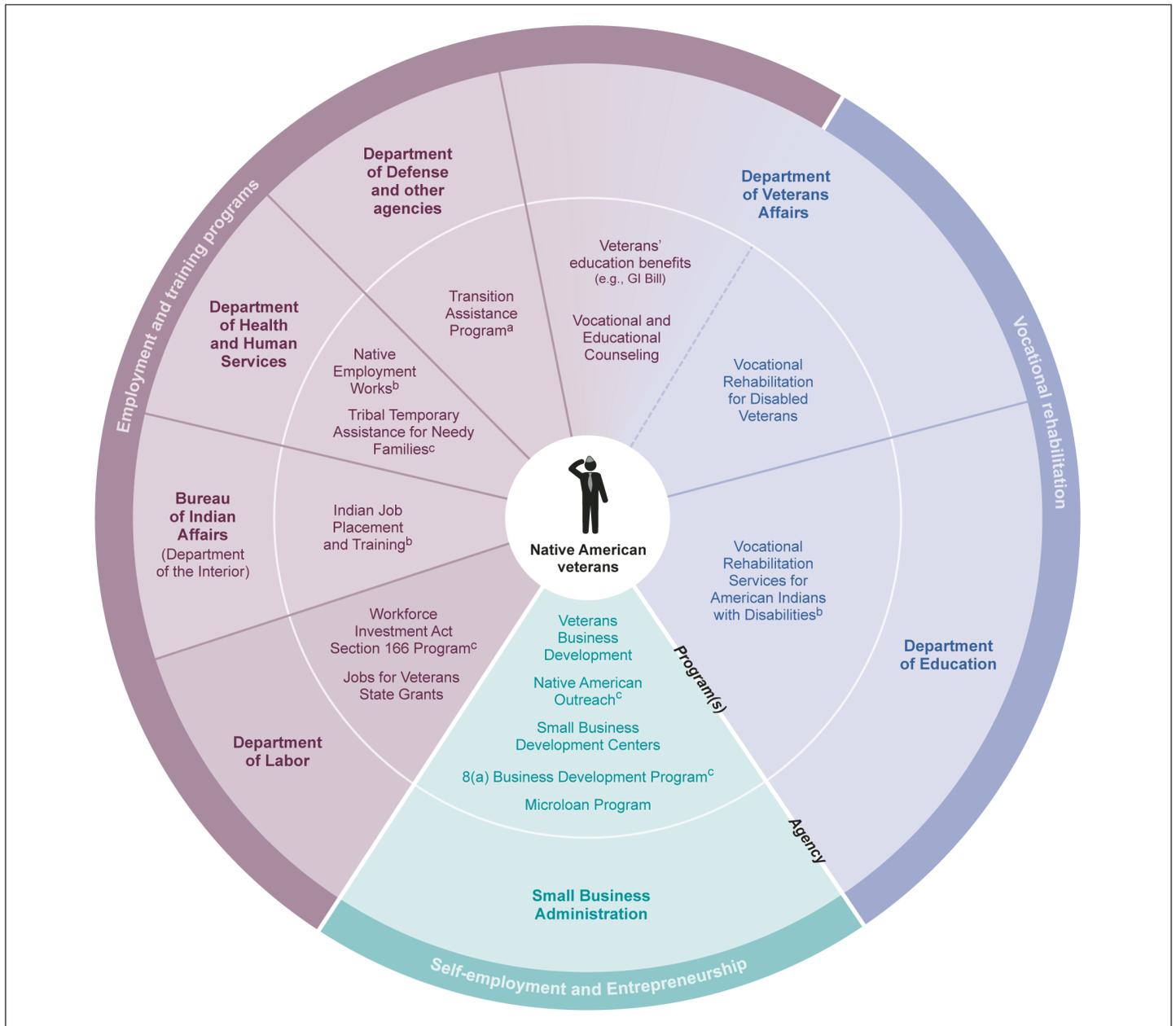
state workforce agencies.¹⁵ DVOPs and LVERs provide services including skills assessment, job search assistance, and outreach to employers on behalf of veteran jobseekers, among other services. JVSG grants are awarded to states, and although Native American tribes are not eligible grantees under the program,¹⁶ Native American veterans who are otherwise eligible can be served by DVOPs and LVERs. In general, in order to provide services on tribal land, DVOPs and LVERs schedule their visits to tribal land on a case-by-case basis. JVSG funding is allocated to each state in proportion to the number of veterans seeking employment within the state. Additionally, the JVSG program is a mandatory partner in the Workforce Investment Act system of American Job Centers, or one-stops, where services are provided by a range of employment and training programs in a single location.¹⁷ In 2012, there were 2,600 American Job Centers nationwide, and according to DOL, 12 are located on or affiliated with tribal land.

¹⁵ For more information on the JVSG program, see GAO, *Veterans' Employment and Training: Better Targeting, Coordinating, and Reporting Needed to Enhance Program Effectiveness*, [GAO-13-29](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 13, 2012).

¹⁶ Under the authorizing statute, a "state" includes any state, the District of Columbia, and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and may include certain other territories. 38 U.S.C. §§ 4102a(b)(5), 4101(6).

¹⁷ The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 created a comprehensive workforce investment system that brought together multiple federally funded employment and training programs into a single system, called the one-stop system. Pub. L. No. 105-220, 112 Stat. 936 (codified as amended at 29 U.S.C. § 2801 et seq.). In 2012, DOL issued guidance encouraging the use of American Job Centers as a uniform name for one-stops. DOL Training and Employment Guidance Letter 36-11, *Announcement of American Job Center Network* (June 14, 2012).

Figure 2: Selected Federal Agencies' Employment and Training-Related Programs That Can Serve Native American Veterans



Source: GAO analysis of the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance.

Note: Whether an individual Native American veteran is eligible to receive services depends on the program eligibility requirements, which vary across programs. It was beyond the scope of this review to identify the specific eligibility criteria for each program. This list of programs is not intended to be

exhaustive, and there may be other federal programs that serve Native American veterans but are not listed here.

^aThe Departments of Defense, Labor, and Veterans Affairs, in partnership with other federal agencies, administer the Transition Assistance Program for servicemembers who are transitioning to civilian life.

^bThese programs may serve eligible American Indians and Alaska Natives, as defined by each program.

^cThese programs may serve eligible American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians, as defined by each program. With regard to Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), although Native Hawaiians are not eligible for tribal grants under this program, the state of Hawaii is eligible for TANF grants, and eligible Native Hawaiians can be served by this program.

DINAP, within DOL's Employment and Training Administration, serves Native American veterans under Section 166 of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998. This program serves all eligible Native Americans—veterans and non-veterans alike—including American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians.¹⁸ Under the program, in 2012, DINAP administered grants to Native American entities in all 50 states, including Alaska and Hawaii. These grants support comprehensive workforce investment activities for Native Americans, including employment and training services for jobseekers. The Jobs for Veterans Act established a priority of service requirement for veterans in qualified DOL job training programs, including WIA programs.¹⁹ WIA Section 166 grantees must therefore give priority to veterans over others seeking employment and training services.

Other federal agencies also administer employment and training-related programs that serve Native American veterans, among other groups. These programs include the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs' Indian Job Placement and Training program; Department of Veterans Affairs programs including Vocational Rehabilitation for Disabled Veterans; and the Department of Education's Vocational Rehabilitation Services for American Indians with Disabilities, among other federal programs. In addition, the Department of Defense (DOD), in partnership with VA, DOL, and other agencies, administers the Transition Assistance Program, which provides mandatory, multiple-day transition

¹⁸ 29 U.S.C. § 2911. For definitions of these terms for purposes of eligibility for services under WIA Section 166, see 29 U.S.C. § 2911(b). Section 166 authorizes DOL to make grants to Indian tribes, tribal organizations, Alaska Native entities, Indian-controlled organizations serving Indians, or Native Hawaiian organizations. 29 U.S.C. § 2911(c)(1).

¹⁹ Pub. L. No. 107-288, § 2(a), 116 Stat. 2033, 2033-34 (2002) (codified as amended at 38 U.S.C. § 4215). See also 20 C.F.R. pt. 1010.

briefings at military bases to facilitate servicemembers' transition to civilian life, including a focus on preparation for employment. Additionally, the Small Business Administration (SBA) administers programs to facilitate self-employment for veterans and Native Americans, including American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians.

2010 DOL Report on Native American Veterans on Tribal Land

DOL's 2010 report was prepared in response to a provision in the Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2008. This provision required DOL, in consultation with VA and DOI, to submit a report assessing the employment needs of Native American veterans living on tribal lands to the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs. The Act further required that the report include recommendations for improving employment and job training opportunities for such veterans, and a review of current and prior government-to-government relationships between VETS and tribal organizations. DOL contracted with a consulting firm, which issued a report to DOL in March 2010, and relied on interviews and surveys of federal and state officials, tribal organizations, surveys of Native American veterans, and focus groups. The contractor's report focused on VETS and the JVSG program, but also considered WIA Section 166 and other relevant programs. The contractor found little or no attention by the JVSG program to the needs of Native American veterans, and although it noted some progress in relationships between DOL and tribal governments, it found little awareness of VETS programs among tribal organizations. Based upon the contractor's report, DOL issued its final report, including six recommendations, to Congress in October 2010.²⁰ DOL's report included recommendations for short- and long-term actions DOL could take in key areas, but did not include a specific timetable for implementation.

DOL Has Made Limited Progress in Implementing Recommendations

DOL is in the early stages of implementing several of the report's recommendations, but implementation of the remaining recommendations has not occurred. The agency has begun to take initial steps to respond to three of the report's six recommendations: improve interagency collaboration, create an advisory committee subgroup for Native American veterans, and conduct a needs assessment. DOL has taken little to no action on the remaining three recommendations: increase

²⁰ DOL did not release its report to the public.

outreach, pursue program flexibility, and boost economic development. DOL officials told us that leadership transitions and budget challenges have significantly contributed to their current position and limited endorsement of these recommendations. For detailed information on the status of each of these three recommendations from DOL's 2010 report, see appendix II.

Collaboration. To respond to the recommendations to increase collaboration with federal and state agencies and outreach to tribal governments, DOL has begun collaborating with agencies that serve veterans, including VA and BIA, to learn more about how to better serve Native American veterans and has conducted several listening sessions with tribal leadership.

Advisory subcommittee. The 2010 report also recommended that DOL create an advisory committee subgroup on Native American veterans' employment issues to the DOL Advisory Committee on Veterans' Employment, Training and Employer Outreach (ACVETEO).²¹ DOL officials told us that although VETS may offer proposals to the committee, the ACVETEO members decide—because the ACVETEO operates independently—whether to establish a new subgroup. DOL is currently developing a proposal, to be presented to ACVETEO, to establish a subgroup for Native American veterans, and is also considering appointing a representative from the Native American veterans' community to join ACVETEO.

Needs assessment. DOL officials told us that they have no plans to conduct a needs assessment to develop better data on Native American veterans living on tribal land, citing potentially prohibitive costs to conducting a comprehensive assessment. However, DOL has identified a potential source for data within DOD that provides race and ethnicity as well as address information for returning veterans. This information could help DVOPs and LVERs target their visits to tribal land, but DOL's plans to acquire these data are still being negotiated and could take time to finalize. In the interim, DOL has identified VA data that, while not comprehensive, in the short term, might provide an estimate of the number of Native American veterans on tribal land.

²¹ 38 U.S.C. § 4110.

Outreach. The 2010 report recommended that DOL launch a communications program focused on outreach to Native American veterans on tribal land by establishing a public information campaign to share information about VETS programs through the use of the web, direct mail, newspapers, and social media. However, DOL officials told us that they have not initiated such a campaign due to limited funding.

Program flexibility. A DOL official said that the agency has not pursued the recommendation to provide additional program flexibility, explaining that under the JVSG program, states already have some flexibility under current law to permit them to build solutions to fit their needs. The report recommends that DOL identify, on a program-by-program basis, available flexibilities to meet the needs of Native American veterans living on tribal lands. While DOL has indicated that it is open to identifying any such opportunities that exist under current law, to date it has taken little action in this area.

Economic development. With regard to economic development, the 2010 report noted that programs to support economic development—such as financing and support for new businesses—lie outside VETS’s authority. However, the report also noted that economic development should be a major focus across federal programs addressing employment concerns for Native American veterans. To date, DOL officials told us they had taken no action on this issue and emphasized that, with regard to economic development, DOL’s focus is on the role that skills can play.

Since delivering the report in 2010, DOL has not developed a strategy that specifically establishes roles and responsibilities, goals, and time frames for implementation of the report’s recommendations. Our past work identified key practices for implementing organizational change efforts to improve an agency’s programs, including establishing a coherent mission and integrated strategic goals to guide the effort; setting a timeline to build momentum and show progress from day one; and dedicating a team to manage the implementation process.²² Although there is no established set of requirements for developing a plan to implement a new effort, components of sound planning are important because they define what organizations seek to accomplish and identify

²² GAO, *Results-Oriented Cultures: Implementation Steps to Assist Mergers and Organizational Transformations*, GAO-03-669 (Washington, D.C.: July 2, 2003).

specific activities to obtain desired results. According to senior DOL officials, DOL has prepared a draft internal memorandum that describes some of the findings from listening sessions conducted with tribal leaders and contained a few recommended action items that address some of the 2010 report recommendations. However, according to DOL officials, the memorandum does not address each of the six 2010 report recommendations. It also does not identify costs, roles and responsibilities, or project time frames.

Expanded Efforts Could Improve Implementation of the 2010 Recommendations

DOL could expand on its efforts to implement the 2010 report's recommendations to improve employment service delivery to Native American veterans on tribal land, even within its constrained budget environment. For detailed information on opportunities for DOL to better implement the 2010 report recommendations, see appendix II.

Collaboration. DOL could expand its collaboration efforts to include other federal agencies that administer programs that serve Native American veterans, such as the SBA, and the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services (HHS). For example, working with SBA could provide DOL access to information that might aid Native American veterans in remote areas with limited employment opportunities by providing access to training and support for veterans interested in self-employment. An official from SBA agreed that additional collaboration would improve self-employment training opportunities for Native American veterans. In addition, DOL can leverage state level collaborations with other agencies and tribal governments. For example, during our site visits we learned that some DVOPs and LVERs have leveraged other federal and state agencies' resources to help serve Native American veterans. For instance, in one state, a DVOP that serves Native American veterans in remote communities joined VA's mobile units to provide both health and employment services to Native American veterans to reduce travel time and reach additional veterans. However, to date, DOL has not identified promising practices for possible dissemination to other JVSG grantees.

Advisory subcommittee. We have stated in past work that federal agencies have used a variety of mechanisms to implement interagency collaborative efforts, including supporting the establishment of

interagency work groups.²³ In addition to including Native American veterans on the Advisory Committee on Veterans' Employment, Training and Employer Outreach (ACVETEO), DOL could appoint qualified individuals from other agencies that serve Native American veterans, such as BIA and HHS. Both BIA and HHS administer programs that may be used to provide employment training to Native American veterans on tribal land. Including BIA and HHS on the ACVETEO could provide additional opportunities to leverage resources and share knowledge that could result in improved access to employment and training services for veterans on tribal land.

Needs assessment. Options may exist for DOL to develop or obtain better data to assess the needs of Native American veterans returning to tribal land. Currently, no mechanism that we could identify exists to share data with tribes on the number and timing of Native American veterans returning to tribal communities. In the absence of timely data on the population of Native American veterans who need employment and training services, state agencies and JVSG staff must try to gauge and meet needs in other ways. DOL could develop or obtain better data on Native American veterans returning to tribal land by coordinating with DOD and VA or other agencies that maintain contact information on recently separated veterans. Specifically, according to a DOD official, DOD data on separating servicemembers are shared with VA, which modifies the data for its own purposes and then shares the data with state veterans' agencies. According to this official, the data include fields for ethnicity, including Native American ethnicities. As a result, the data that state veterans agencies receive from VA may be helpful to DOL in identifying recently separated Native American veterans.

Outreach. DOL can leverage the outreach activities conducted by state and local entities. For example, JVSG staff in several states have conducted training sessions in tribal communities focused on veterans' transition to civilian life, while other JVSG staff have built on a VA initiative that trains volunteers in tribal communities to educate veterans about employment and training services available to them. In addition, some tribal officials and Native American veterans told us that some veterans prefer in-person outreach. To this end, veterans outreach staff in

²³ GAO, *Managing for Results: Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms*, [GAO-12-1022](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2012).

some states have been leveraging libraries and tribal colleges to conduct outreach to tribal veterans.

Program flexibility. Although few tribal officials and Native American veterans we spoke with identified opportunities for additional program flexibility in the JVSG program, DOL could consider ways to use existing program flexibility to better serve veterans and enhance service delivery. Specifically, DOL is considering plans to ask states to explicitly describe their efforts to serve Native American veterans in their required JVSG 5-year grant operating plans, which could help ensure that states consider the needs of Native American veterans when preparing their plans. However, to date, DOL has not established a time frame for completion. Encouraging grantees to describe their plans to address the needs of Native American veterans in their state could increase the likelihood that grantees might design a service delivery strategy that takes into account the unique needs of the various tribal communities they serve.

Economic development. DOL has the potential to better understand and support economic development by reviewing its existing grants and guidance on this topic and identifying lessons learned to disseminate to JVSG state and WIA Section 166 grantees.²⁴ In the past, DOL, through its Employment and Training Administration (ETA), has awarded grants that have aligned employment and training grants with economic development needs. Recent grantees have included tribal entities. For example, ETA awarded a grant to a tribal college to train workers, foster business development and promote entrepreneurship on tribal land. DOL has an opportunity to review such grants to disseminate lessons learned on the extent to which Native American veterans participated in and benefited from grant-funded activities, as well as opportunities to incorporate economic development principles into existing grants. For example, DINAP recently visited an Arizona tribe to identify lessons learned on its progress in implementing a grant that aims to increase job opportunities for veterans and others in occupations that reflect employers' need for

²⁴ For examples of past DOL guidance related to economic development, see DOL Training and Employment Guidance Letter 12-10, *Supporting Entrepreneurial and Self-Employment Training through the Workforce Investment System* (Nov. 15, 2010); DOL Training and Employment Notice 25-09, *Think Entrepreneurs: A Call to Action – Integrating Entrepreneurship into the Public Workforce System Throughout America* (Jan. 22, 2010); and DOL Training and Employment Guidance Letter 13-07, *Use of Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Funds for Workforce Development Activities in Support of Economic Development* (Dec. 11, 2007).

skills, according to ETA officials. However, DINAP's grant review activities to date have not involved VETS, nor has there been any technical assistance developed in connection with these activities, according to a DINAP official.

Conclusions

The 2010 DOL report provides the foundation upon which to develop a strategy for achieving the recommendations' goals. However, DOL has not yet developed a strategy to implement all of its recommendations to improve employment and training services for Native American veterans living on tribal land. Until DOL develops an overall strategy that establishes the roles and responsibilities, costs, and time frames for implementation, it will be difficult to determine whether DOL is on track for effectively implementing the recommendations.

Under current budget limitations, DOL must approach the needs of Native American veterans in tribal communities with a response that is both proportionate to the needs of this community and cost-effective. It is essential for DOL to properly target its efforts to ensure that those most in need of services receive assistance. Without current information on the number of Native American veterans living on tribal land and a fuller understanding of their needs, DOL will be unable to appropriately identify and target those services. DOL has taken some initial steps to conduct outreach to tribal communities and has begun collaboration with other agencies. However, without conducting additional outreach and collaboration with other organizations within DOL and other federal, state, and tribal agencies that serve Native American veterans, DOL may miss the opportunity to leverage the knowledge and resources of those agencies that are already serving veterans in tribal communities.

Without adequate job opportunities, employment and training services alone may simply frustrate Native American veterans seeking employment. While economic development is not DOL's primary mission, the agency has an opportunity to better understand and support economic development on tribal land by reviewing its existing grants and guidance on this topic and identifying lessons learned to disseminate to its grantees that provide these critical employment and training services to Native American veterans on tribal land and forming partnerships with other agencies that can support these efforts. Without action from DOL to provide improved access to employment and training services, many Native American veterans that have honorably served their country will remain at risk of being underserved and unemployed.

Recommendations for Executive Action

To strengthen DOL's efforts to respond to the 2010 report recommendations to improve employment services and training opportunities for Native American veterans on tribal land, we recommend that the Secretary of Labor undertake the following three actions:

1. Ensure it has a written strategy to position the agency to efficiently and effectively respond to the 2010 recommendations, including the identification of roles and responsibilities as well as the goals, costs, and time frames to complete their implementation.
2. Identify and disseminate lessons learned and promising practices from DOL and other agencies' efforts. To identify such lessons or practices, DOL could:
 - a. Review efforts by JVSG grantees to improve DVOP and LVER outreach, such as the use of mobile units to conduct outreach on tribal lands; and
 - b. Review DOL's portfolio of employment and training grants and guidance related to economic development for application to JVSG and WIA Section 166 grantees.
3. Expand collaboration with other agencies to leverage agency resources. This effort could include working through the ACVETEO and other efforts, strengthening relationships with agencies that also serve Native American veterans, such as DOD, VA, SBA, and BIA, as well as building relationships with other agencies that serve Native American veterans, such as Education and HHS.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

DOL Comments. We provided a draft of this report to DOL for review and comment. DOL provided a written response to this report (see app. IV). DOL agreed with our recommendations and identified actions it has taken to implement the recommendations of the 2010 report. Regarding our first recommendation, DOL noted that it is working to develop a written strategy to implement the 2010 recommendations. However, DOL noted that it must first develop a better understanding of the extent of unemployment and training gaps on reservations nationwide, among other pieces of information, to establish a more comprehensive plan of action, and cited the need for an update to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) report *American Indian Population and Labor Force Report*—last published in 2005—as key to developing its plan. To the extent that there are obstacles to implementing the 2010 recommendations, such as incomplete data, it is important that DOL proceed with developing a written strategy that explicitly identifies such obstacles and proposes

ways to mitigate them. One mitigation strategy, consistent with our findings and recommendations, could be to further leverage collaborative relationships with other federal agencies.

Regarding our recommendation to identify and disseminate lessons learned and promising practices from its own and other agencies' efforts, DOL agreed to review efforts by the JVSG state grantees and their DVOPs and LVERs who serve Native American veterans. DOL noted that its Division of Indian and Native American Programs (DINAP), located within the Employment and Training Administration (ETA), already reviews employment and training grants related to economic development for application to DINAP's WIA Section 166 grantees, and will continue to do so. DOL added that it held national conferences for the WIA Section 166 grantees, which provided a platform for sharing best practices. While these actions are useful, in order to fully leverage the department's efforts, dissemination of lessons learned and promising practices should extend beyond these grantees to the JVSG program and the DVOPs and LVERs whose efforts are supported by the JVSG grants. For example, information about ETA grants that include Native American veterans could help DVOPs and LVERs learn about promising practices and inform the Native American veterans they serve about additional training opportunities. Finally, another way to disseminate lessons learned and promising practices is through technical assistance. However, a DINAP official acknowledged, as we indicate in this report, that no technical assistance has been developed to date in connection with its efforts to review ETA grants for lessons learned.

Regarding our recommendation to expand collaboration with other agencies, DOL agreed and noted that collaboration with other agencies has been effective in addressing the needs of Native American veterans living on tribal land. DOL also noted that it will propose that the ACVETEO establish a subcommittee to advise its members on issues and services related to Native American veterans on tribal lands.

VA and BIA Comments. We provided a draft of this report to VA and BIA for review and comment. Both provided technical comments, which we incorporated, as appropriate. VA generally agreed with our findings. VA noted that under the auspices of a Memorandum of Understanding between VA and the Department of Health and Human Services' Indian Health Service signed on October 1, 2010, there are shared opportunities

for coordination, collaboration, and resource-sharing for workforce development, and cited six action steps reported in FY 2013.²⁵ BIA stated that it was an outstanding report.

Tribal Groups. Additionally, we provided selected tribes, with whom we met during site visits, with a draft of pertinent excerpts and incorporated their technical comments, as appropriate.

As agreed with your staff, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 30 days from its issue date. At that time, we will send copies of this report to interested congressional committees; the Secretary of Labor, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs; the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs; and other interested parties. The report also is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

Please contact me on (202) 512-7215 or at sherrilla@gao.gov if you or your staff have any questions about this report. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. Key contributors to this report are listed in appendix V.



Andrew Sherrill
Director, Education, Workforce,
and Income Security Issues

²⁵ See GAO, *VA and IHS: Further Action Needed to Collaborate on Providing Health Care to Native American Veterans*, [GAO-13-354](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr 26, 2013).

List of Requesters

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chairman
Committee on the Budget
United States Senate

The Honorable Bernie Sanders
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Mark Begich
United States Senate

The Honorable Mazie Hirono
United States Senate

The Honorable Jon Tester
United States Senate

Appendix I: Groups Interviewed

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| Federal agency officials | Department of Labor (DOL), Veterans' Employment and Training Service, including senior agency officials, and State Directors for Veterans' Employment and Training (DVETs) from Arizona, New Mexico, North Carolina, Alaska, Hawaii, Washington, North Dakota, and Montana |
| | Department of Labor (DOL), Division of Indian and Native American Programs (DINAP) |
| | Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Office of Tribal Government Relations |
| | Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) |
| | Small Business Administration (SBA) |
| | Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) |
| State officials | State veterans coordinators from Arizona, New Mexico, North Carolina, Alaska, Hawaii, North Dakota, and Montana |
| | Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program specialists (DVOPs) and Local Veterans' Employment Representatives (LVERs) from Arizona, New Mexico, North Carolina, Alaska, Hawaii, and Montana |
| Tribal leaders, program administrators, and veterans | Zuni Tribe of the Zuni Reservation, New Mexico |
| | Navajo Nation, Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah |
| | Hopi Tribe of Arizona |
| | Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians |
| | Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation |
| | Spirit Lake Tribe, North Dakota |
| Native Hawaiian program administrators and veterans | White Earth Band of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, Minnesota |
| | Veterans to Farmers Initiative |
| | Big Island Workplace Connection |
| | Papa Alo Lokahi (Uncles and Aunties initiative) |
| | State of Hawaii, Office of Hawaiian Affairs |
| Alaska Native program administrators and veterans | State of Hawaii, Department of Hawaiian Home Lands |
| | Alu Like |
| | Cook Inlet Tribal Council |
| | Alaska Tribal Veterans Representatives |
| Associations and Other Groups | Knik Tribal Council |
| | Aleutian/Pribilof Islands Association |
| | Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development |
| | National Association of State Workforce Agencies |
| | National Congress of American Indians |
| | Salish Kootenai College |
| | National American Indian Veterans |
| 19 Tribal Nations Workforce Investment Board, Arizona | |
| National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development | |

Appendix I: Groups Interviewed

United Tribes Technical College

U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Native American Enterprise Initiative

Alaska Native Village CEO Association

Source: GAO interviews.

Appendix II: Status of Recommendations from DOL's 2010 Report and Steps to Improve upon Efforts



Improve Agency Collaboration

DOL Has Taken Initial Steps to Increase Collaboration, but Efforts Can Be Expanded

Recommendation Summary

The 2010 report found that there was a need for increased collaboration across federal and state agencies with tribal governments in improving employment for Native American veterans. The report suggested that agencies that address the employment needs of Native American veterans, such as DOI and VA, could work with DOL to help address barriers that Native American veterans often face in accessing and maintaining meaningful employment. Closer collaboration between these agencies could boost focus on the veterans' needs and help to leverage agency resources to provide more coordinated service delivery.

The report also proposed that offering services in true partnership with tribal governments brings local knowledge, local relationships, and cultural understanding. To better serve Native American veterans, the report recommended the following specific actions:

- **leverage agencies' resources;** and
- **partner with tribal governments.**

DOL Recommendation Status

DOL is in the early stages of implementing the report's recommendations related to improving collaboration with federal and state agencies and tribal governments. In October and November of 2012, a DOL official conducted several listening sessions with tribal leaders in Arizona and with a tribal workforce administrator in California to learn more about the needs of Native American veterans.

In preparation for conducting its listening sessions, DOL Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) staff met with officials from other organizations within DOL and other agencies that serve Native American veterans. VETS staff received guidance from DOL's Division of Indian and Native American Programs, VA's Office of Tribal Government Relations, and the Department of the Interior's (DOI) Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to identify potential sites and to inform how DOL should structure its listening sessions. One DOL official told us of preliminary plans to meet quarterly with both VA and BIA to discuss issues related to employing Native American veterans.

Possible Expansion of DOL Efforts

There may be additional opportunities for DOL to expand its proposed approach to improving collaboration with other agencies and tribal governments. At the federal level, DOL has reached out to initiate collaboration with VA and BIA, but it currently has no plans to initiate collaboration with other agencies that offer employment and training and other support services to Native American veterans, such as Education, HHS, SBA, or DOD. For example, our site visits indicated that some Native Americans veterans received employment services from Education's Vocational Rehabilitation Services for American Indians with Disabilities program. DOL can consider partnering with this program to jointly serve Native American veterans. At the tribal level, DOL's efforts to reach out to selected tribes has focused on tribal leadership to date, but has not included tribal veterans agencies.

In addition to efforts at the federal level, at the state level, there have been efforts to collaborate with other agencies and tribal governments. However, to date, DOL has not made efforts to identify promising practices to improve service delivery and disseminate them to other state grantees. For example, during our site visits we learned that some DVOPs and LVERs had made their own efforts to leverage agency resources and partner with leaders in tribal communities:

- In North Carolina, a LVER established relationships with the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians' veterans' service organization to begin to bring services to veterans in the community.
- In Montana, a DVOP established a partnership with the mobile VA Vet Center to provide both health and employment services to Native American veterans in remote areas (see fig.).



Improve Agency Collaboration (cont.)

Possible Expansion of DOL Efforts (cont.)



Source: Montana Department of Labor and Industry.

JVSG staff in Montana visit the Crow Agency using a VA Vet Center mobile unit, May 7, 2013.

During our site visits, we also brought together tribal workforce and veterans' agencies, and these meetings often served to initiate discussions for future collaboration between them in specific areas, such as the use of incentives for employers to hire veterans and assistance in preparing resumes that explain veterans' military backgrounds and skills. However, DOL has issued no guidance or technical assistance to its Native American WIA Section 166 grantees to encourage collaboration within tribal governments or to help them develop their own outreach plans. DOL officials told us they expect to provide additional guidance in this area beginning in 2014.

Alaska, New Mexico, and North Dakota offer cultural competency training to staff serving veterans, which some JVSG staff said was beneficial in their efforts to serve Native American veterans. In addition, some Native American veterans emphasized the importance to them of culturally-sensitive services.



Recommendation Summary

The 2010 report found no coordinated federal response to the issues facing Native American veterans. While DOL, DOI, and VA all have employment assistance programs that serve Native American veterans, there is currently no platform that allows for the coordination of various agency efforts on behalf of Native American veterans, according to the report. To increase the coordination of agency efforts and focus on the specific issues impacting Native American Veterans, the report recommended that DOL:

- **create a subgroup focused on Native American veterans' employment issues** under the DOL Advisory Committee on Veterans' Employment, Training, and Employer Outreach (ACVETEO), which would be comprised of agency representatives, Native American Veterans, and others engaged in providing employment and training opportunities; and
- that the subgroup **meet periodically** and include representatives from the VA, DOD, DOL, DOI, and other departments, as appropriate.

Create Advisory Subcommittee

DOL Is Developing a Proposal to Establish an Advisory Committee Subgroup

DOL Recommendation Status

The 2010 report recommended that DOL create an advisory committee subgroup on Native American veterans' employment issues. DOL officials told us that although VETS may offer proposals to the committee, the ACVETEO members decide—because the ACVETEO operates independently—whether to establish a new subgroup.

According to agency officials, DOL is currently in the process of developing such a proposal to present to the ACVETEO to establish an advisory committee subgroup on Native American veterans. In addition, DOL is considering appointing a representative from the Native American veterans' community to participate on the DOL ACVETEO. However, DOL has not specifically identified who they might appoint for this position. Currently, the ACVETEO has members from VA, DOL, DOD, and SBA, but does not have members from other agencies that provide employment services to Native American veterans, like BIA and HHS.

Possible Expansion of DOL Efforts

Our past work has stated that federal agencies have used a variety of mechanisms to implement interagency collaborative efforts, including establishing interagency work groups. In addition to including Native American veterans on the ACVETEO, DOL has the opportunity to appoint qualified individuals from other agencies that serve Native American veterans, such as BIA, HHS, and Education. Members from other agencies that also support employment and training services on tribal land could provide the opportunity for DOL to coordinate efforts, share knowledge, and leverage agency resources to provide services to Native American veterans living on tribal land.

As DOL develops its proposal to create an ACVETEO subgroup, it has the opportunity to encourage the committee to form the group in a way that enhances and sustains its collaborative efforts. Our past work suggests that to establish effective work groups or other mechanisms for collaboration, agencies should:

- define and articulate a common outcome;
- establish mutually reinforcing or joint strategies;
- identify and address needs by leveraging resources;
- agree on roles and responsibilities;
- establish compatible policies, procedures, and other means to operate across agency boundaries;
- develop mechanisms to monitor, evaluate, and report on results;
- reinforce agency accountability for collaborative efforts through agency plans and reports; and
- reinforce individual accountability for collaborative efforts through performance management systems.



Recommendation Summary

The 2010 report recommended conducting a needs assessment by reviewing existing federal and state programs and services available to Native American veterans, in order to identify unmet needs and eliminate inefficiencies with the aim of improving service delivery.

The report recommended the following key actions:

- **obtain a reliable estimate** of the number of veterans living on tribal land in need of employment services by working with VA and BIA; and add outcome measures for all programs to track Native American veterans; and
- **assist veterans with the transition to civilian life** by providing them with a job placement and training plan and with a list of available resources.

Assess Needs

DOL Could Pursue Opportunities to Develop Better Data on Veterans Returning to Tribal Land

DOL Recommendation Status

DOL has no plans to conduct a formal needs assessment of the employment and training needs of Native American veterans. The cost and complexity of such a project would likely be prohibitive, according to a DOL official. However, regarding the recommendation to estimate the number of Native American veterans on tribal land, a DOL official told us that the agency is in the early stages of identifying potential data sources. Specifically, DOL has identified a potential source for data within DOD that provides race and ethnicity as well as address information for returning veterans that could help DVOPs and LVERs target their visits to tribal land, but its plans to acquire these data are still being negotiated and could take time to finalize. In the interim, DOL has identified data from VA that, while not comprehensive, might in the short term, provide an estimate of the number of Native American veterans on tribal land. Regarding outcome data, DOL does not collect data on veterans served by the JVSG program by race or ethnicity. However, according to a VETS official, DOL is planning a comprehensive review of its approach to tracking veterans' data. Although DOL does collect data on Native American veterans served by its WIA programs, it does not track those served on tribal land.

With regard to the recommendation on job placement and training plans, currently, all servicemembers develop such Individual Transition Plans through mandatory participation in the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), which is currently being revised. However, although DOL provides information through TAP that could help veterans returning to their communities, such as how to access DVOPs and LVERs at American Job Centers, as of July 2013, due to changes in agency priorities, DOL had no plans to include contact information for WIA Section 166 grantees, which could help Native American veterans returning to tribal land. According to a DOL official, providing this level of information during TAP sessions, which are applicable to all veterans, would be impractical. Additionally, as of July 2013, a DOL official acknowledged that there are no specific changes to TAP that focus on Native American veterans. However, DOL told us that there will be overarching changes to the TAP program that will aid all transitioning servicemembers.

Regarding service delivery, DOL requested and received information in November 2012 about DVOPs' and LVERs' services to Native American veterans, but to date, has not fully reviewed this information to identify promising practices that could improve services for these veterans.

Possible Expansion of DOL Efforts

Currently, no mechanism that we could identify exists to share data with tribes or JVSG staff on the number and timing of veterans returning to tribal communities. During our site visits, most DVETS and state officials said they do not know when veterans return to their communities, and most tribal administrators we spoke to said they receive no notice of their return—at a point when these veterans would most likely need



Assess Needs (cont.)

Possible Expansion of DOL Efforts (cont.)

employment and training services. Furthermore, both tribal administrators and officials at the state level identified various data sources that they used to estimate the number of veterans living on tribal land, including 2002 Census data, and tribal veterans and health agencies' data. Such data, however, may not reflect the need for employment and training services. For example, tribal health agency data are likely to reflect Native American veterans' needs for medical care, not necessarily for employment and training services, and not necessarily the needs of recently separated veterans.

In the absence of timely data on the population of Native American veterans who need employment and training services, state agencies and JVSG staff must try to gauge and meet needs in other ways. For example, in North Dakota, the state workforce agency provides pamphlets on JVSG services to the state veterans' agency for inclusion in welcome packets for returning veterans. In another state, a LVER who has recently begun working with one tribe told us that he plans to gauge demand for his services based on attendance when he visits the tribe.

DOL has an opportunity to develop or obtain better data on Native American veterans returning to tribal land by working with other federal agencies. Specifically, according to a DOD official, DOD data on separating servicemembers are shared with VA, which modifies the data for its own purposes and then shares the data with state veterans' agencies. According to this official, the data include fields for ethnicity, including Native American ethnicities. As a result, the data that state veterans agencies receive from VA may be helpful in identifying recently separated Native American veterans. However, until DOL reaches a data-sharing agreement with either DOD or the VA, better data will not be available to state workforce agencies or the DVOPs and LVERs they employ. Recognizing the potential benefits, the DVET for Montana said he is seeking access to these data from the state's veterans' agency, through a proposed Memorandum of Understanding.

DOL also has an opportunity to identify and disseminate lessons learned about states' efforts to provide short transition briefings tailored to the needs of Native American veterans. DVOPs and LVERs have identified opportunities to deliver such customized transition briefings for Native American veterans in at least two states. In New Mexico and North Dakota, DVOPs and LVERs have provided abbreviated transition briefings to tribal communities. In our site visits, when we asked about the potential value of such customized transition briefings, some Native American veterans expressed interest in such an approach. Additionally, in one state, DVOPs and LVERs try to reach Native American veterans through welcoming ceremonies, according to that state's DVET.



Recommendation Summary

The 2010 report found that awareness of employment services available to Native American veterans was relatively low on tribal lands, even among those who were eligible. In addition, focus groups in the DOL study mentioned the need for more information, communication, or outreach to veterans. The report also suggested that any communications program take into account the generally limited communications infrastructure on tribal lands and employ multiple modes of communication (e.g., tribal newspapers, Internet, direct mail, social media, and tribal gatherings) to reach veterans on tribal lands. According to the report, DOL's outreach efforts should raise awareness of DOL programs and facilitate the sharing of data among tribal leaders and those engaging in workforce development on tribal land. Specifically, the report recommended that DOL:

- **create a public information program** to reach as many Native American veterans as possible; and
- **facilitate the sharing of information and data on available resources among tribal leadership and other government entities** engaged in workforce development programs on tribal lands throughout the country.

Conduct Outreach

Budget Challenges Limit DOL's Outreach Campaign, but There Are Opportunities to Build on Existing Efforts

DOL Recommendation Status

The 2010 report recommended that DOL launch a communications program focused on outreach to Native American veterans on tribal land by establishing a public information campaign to share information about VETS programs through the use of the web, direct mail, newspapers, and social media. However, DOL officials told us that they have not initiated such a campaign due to budget constraints, but are currently exploring low cost options for conducting outreach.

Although DOL officials report participating in tribal conferences and tribal events at the state level, many of the tribal veterans and workforce program officials and veterans we spoke with were unaware or had limited awareness of services offered by the JVSG program.

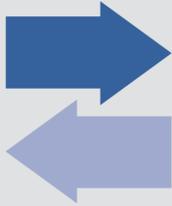
Possible Expansion of DOL Efforts

There may be additional opportunities for DOL to expand its proposed approach to outreach without the use of a large scale public information campaign. DOL has an opportunity to take a more comprehensive strategy and expand outreach efforts that leverage existing state and local level efforts. Expanded efforts could help to raise awareness of VETS programs for Native American veterans on tribal land while minimizing additional costs.

DOL may have an opportunity to learn from the activities of DVOPs and LVERs in certain states who have conducted targeted outreach. For example, in one state, a LVER shared information about services available to veterans through an article in a local newspaper. Several states we visited make employment and other resources available to veterans and employers accessible through a website. For example, according to state officials, New Mexico provides access for jobseekers, including those living in remote areas, by creating a virtual one-stop that offers certain services online.

Some tribal officials and Native Americans veterans told us that some veterans prefer in-person outreach. To this end, veterans outreach staff in some states have been leveraging libraries and tribal colleges to conduct outreach to tribal veterans. Conversely, other Native American veterans we spoke with suggested that in order to reach younger veterans, DOL should consider employing social media to raise awareness of employment and training services among veterans on tribal land.

DOL has an opportunity to encourage states to leverage VA's Tribal Veterans Representatives (TVRs), who are volunteers based on tribal land trained by VA to provide veterans with information about available benefits, to enhance the outreach efforts of DVOPs and LVERs. For example, Alaska state officials said that DVOPs and LVERs coordinated with TVRs to schedule outreach visits. As a result, officials reported improved participation in outreach events and better relations with Alaska Native communities. A similar volunteer-based initiative exists in Hawaii.



Recommendation Summary

The 2010 report found a wide variance of tribal governance, geographic dispersion, technical and communications infrastructure, and economic development challenges that indicate that one-size-fits-all programs may not meet program objectives for many tribes and veterans. The report suggested that to the extent practicable, and legally authorized, programs must deliver flexible and adaptable offerings so that tribal agencies and veterans can build a solution to fit their needs. In particular, the report found that there were no DVOPs or LVERs assigned to live and work in Native American communities, although it did note that DVOPs and LVERs in some states concentrated their efforts on tribal lands. In response, the report recommended that DOL allow for greater flexibility in existing employment programs to better meet the needs of Native American veterans. In order to help tribal agencies and veterans develop solutions to fit their own needs, the report recommended the following specific actions:

- **explore the possibility of assigning DVOPs and LVERs to live and work on tribal land;** and
- **identify available flexibilities to meet the needs of Native American veterans living on tribal lands,** including any additional flexibilities identified through consultation with Native American organizations and tribal councils.

Allow Flexibility

DOL Can Use Current Flexibility to Support State Efforts to Serve Native American Veterans on Tribal Lands

DOL Recommendation Status

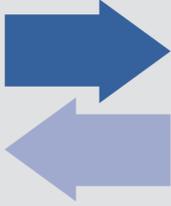
DOL has not pursued the report's proposal to explore the possibility of DVOPs and LVERs living and working on tribal land, citing the flexibility of the JVSG program that states already have under current law. Specifically, states now employ DVOPs and LVERs as they deem appropriate and efficient, subject to DOL's approval. Further, DOL guidance emphasizes that states have flexibility to assign and place DVOPs and LVERs to best address each state's unique needs.

The 2010 report suggested that DVOPs and LVERs live and work on tribal land and included the proposal that they focus their work on the tribal level, rather than the state level. However, JVSG grant amounts appear unlikely to support a full-time focus on tribal land, even for the largest tribes, and such an approach appears impractical for smaller communities. For example, in Alaska, JVSG funds support 4.5 DVOP and LVER staff, who are collectively responsible for outreach to 225 Alaska Native communities (an average of 50 each). In Alaska, each DVOP and LVER is assigned a region of the state, and they told us that they try to visit their assigned region at least twice a year. As in all other states, they also must balance these efforts with their efforts to serve other veterans because under current law, the JVSG grants flow to states to support activities on behalf of all eligible veterans in each state. A DOL official described the challenge as making optimum use of limited resources.

Nevertheless, with regard to flexibility in general, a DOL official emphasized the importance of recognizing the substantial diversity among Native American communities. With regard to additional flexibilities that could help meet the needs of Native American veterans living on tribal lands, DOL has indicated that it is open to identifying any such opportunities that exist under current law, although to date it has taken little action in this area.

Possible Expansion of DOL Efforts

During our site visits, regarding JVSG program flexibility, few state-level officials and tribal leaders identified opportunities for additional flexibility as a primary concern, except for officials and veterans from several tribes, who suggested that JVSG grant funds go to tribes as well as states, which is not possible under current law. Additionally, for example, two tribes favored establishing funding that would be specifically reserved for veterans within DOL's WIA Section 166 program, one advocated for broadened eligibility to allow more veterans to participate in that program, and two suggested streamlining application procedures for DOL's programs to raise participation. Some of these proposed changes might require statutory changes. However, a few state-level officials, tribal leaders and administrators, and Native American veterans also expressed the view that a one-size-fits-all approach would be generally ill-advised, given state and tribal differences.



Allow Flexibility (cont.)

Possible Expansion of DOL Efforts (cont.)

Nevertheless, DOL has an opportunity to consider ways to use existing program flexibility to better serve veterans and encourage better outreach and service delivery. Specifically, DOL is considering plans to ask states to explicitly describe their efforts to serve Native American veterans in their JVSG 5-year grant operating plans, which could help ensure that states consider the needs of Native American veterans when preparing their plans. However, to date, DOL has not established a time frame for completion.



Report Summary

The 2010 report identified the need for economic development on tribal land as a major problem, and noted that, in the absence of job opportunities, providing employment and training services alone may simply frustrate jobseekers.

While noting that economic development programs are outside VETS's authority, the report noted that economic development should be a major focus across federal programs addressing employment concerns for Native American veterans.

Although the report did not recommend specific actions for DOL in this area, it did identify activities that federal agencies could take related to economic development and job opportunities on tribal land, including:

- **document and publish success stories**, share best practices, and provide benchmark information to other tribes; and
- **sponsor and fund training and education** for business start-ups and entrepreneurs on tribal land.

Boost Economic Development

DOL Can Support Tribal Economic Development by Applying Lessons Learned from Existing DOL Grants

DOL Status

DOL officials told us they had taken no action on this issue and emphasized that, with regard to economic development, DOL's focus is on the role that skills can play.

Possible Expansion of DOL Efforts

DOL has an opportunity to better understand and support economic development on tribal land by reviewing its existing grants and guidance on this topic and identifying lessons learned to disseminate to JSVG state and WIA Section 166 grantees. DOL, through ETA, has taken steps to boost economic development generally by aligning some of its discretionary grants with local demand for skills, and by issuing guidance on economic development and entrepreneurship.

In the past, DOL has awarded grants that have aligned employment and training with economic development. ETA has awarded some of its recent grants to Native American entities, and some grants included veterans (see appendix III). DOL has an opportunity to review such grants for lessons learned on how to incorporate economic development principles into existing grants for tribal veterans. For example:

- the Gila River Indian Community in Arizona was awarded a grant to develop career pathways, a sequenced training approach that supports career progression, including a career pathway for veterans; and
- United Tribes Technical College in North Dakota was awarded a grant to train workers, foster business development, and promote entrepreneurship in 19 tribes across 3 states, under a collaborative program that also involved the Small Business Administration (SBA) and the Department of Commerce.

Additionally, in 2007, ETA issued guidance to highlight allowable and prohibited activities under WIA related to economic development, and in 2010, it issued guidance on the use of WIA funds to support entrepreneurship training. VETS and DINAP officials told us that they do not automatically receive notification of ETA grants to Native American entities or ETA guidance not addressed to their grantees.

During our site visits, many officials and veterans alike, as well as others, identified economic development as a need, and some agreed that entrepreneurship could be a viable option for some Native American veterans. For example:

- In Montana, the Salish Kootenai College offers an entrepreneurship program;
- In North Carolina, Cherokee entrepreneurs can seek funding and coaching from the Sequoyah Fund, a Community Development Financial Institution;



Boost Economic Development (cont.)

Possible Expansion of DOL Efforts (cont.)



Source: Hawaii Department of Labor and Industrial Relations.

Native Hawaiian veterans and their families built greenhouses to grow crops for supplemental income.

- In Hawaii, the Vets to Farmers initiative, partly funded by a DOL grant, trained some Native Hawaiian veterans in sustainable agriculture, provided marketing assistance, and continues to help them sell their produce to coastal resorts (see fig.); in addition, initiative leaders told us that participants could use VA education benefits to cover their training costs; and
- In Alaska, the Cook Inlet Tribal Council refers those interested in entrepreneurship to the SBA and other resources.

Appendix III: Selected Recent DOL Grants to Native American Communities That Address Workforce or Economic Development Needs^a

| Year Grant Awarded | Name of Grant Program | Grantee, State | Purpose of Grant Project |
|--------------------|--|--|--|
| 2012 | Workforce Innovation Fund | Gila River Indian Community, Arizona ^{c, d} | To increase opportunities for advancement and employment, create partnerships, engage employers, and develop career pathways, in hospitality, construction, health care, and other occupations. |
| 2011 | Jobs and Innovation Accelerator Challenge ^b | United Tribes Technical College, North Dakota, serving 19 tribes in 3 states | To meet the region's need for qualified environmental technicians and other professionals, accelerate business development opportunities for Native Americans, and reduce unemployment in economically distressed areas. |
| 2010 | Pathways Out of Poverty | White Earth Band of Chippewa, Minnesota | To provide green industry and energy training in construction and sustainable manufacturing, to provide support services and to address Native Americans' unique circumstances. |
| 2010 | Community-Based Job Training | Yuut Elitnaurviat, Alaska, serving 50 Alaska Native villages ^d | To build on training models with proven success, address retention issues, and create a career ladder in construction, industrial maintenance, and health care. |
| 2010 | State Energy Sector Partnership | Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development ^{d, e} | To increase the supply of workers with energy-efficiency skills to support energy-efficient end user technology and the geothermal, hydroelectric, wind turbine and biomass industries. |
| | | Arizona Department of Economic Security ^{d, e} | To provide targeted training and job placement services for green energy industries. |
| | | Hawaii Department of Labor and Industrial Relations ^{d, f} | To develop green industries, provide training in green skills, such as home energy rating, construction, biofuels, and sustainable agriculture, and attract private investment in energy. |

Source: GAO analysis of selected DOL grant summaries.

^aIn addition, not shown here, some of the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grants awarded in 2012 to support training for certain trade-affected workers also included Native Americans or veterans in their target populations, or included tribal governments as partners, and some of these grants went to tribal colleges. For example, the TAACCCT grant project of Mitchell Technical Institute in South Dakota included both Native Americans and veterans among its target populations to be served. Tribal institutions and governments participating in other TAACCCT grant projects included Fort Berthold Community College, Sitting Bull College, and Turtle Mountain Community College, North Dakota; the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, Washington state; and the Mille Lacs Band of Minnesota Chippewa, Minnesota.

^bThis grant program also involved funding from the U.S. Department of Commerce and the Small Business Administration to support economic development and promote job creation, in part through entrepreneurship.

^cThe grantee is developing a career pathway model specifically for veterans, according to a Gila River official.

^dVeterans were included in the target populations to be served by these grant projects. For the other grants shown, veterans were eligible to participate, according to grantee officials.

^eThe grant project summary identified Native American entities as partners.

^fGrant funds supported an entrepreneurship component in which Native Hawaiian veterans are participating.

Appendix IV: Comments from the Department of Labor

U.S. Department of Labor

Assistant Secretary for
Veterans' Employment and Training
Washington, D.C. 20210



SEP 13 2013

Mr. Andrew Sherrill
Director,
Education, Workforce, and
Income Security Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G. Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Sherrill:

On behalf of the U.S. Department of Labor (Department), thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on the Government Accountability Office's (GAO) draft report entitled, *Native American Veterans: Department of Labor Needs a Clear Plan to Improve Employment and Training Services on Tribal Lands (GAO-13-664)*. Your draft report offers a thorough review of the challenges that the Workforce System and the Department face in providing employment and training services to Native American veterans living on tribal lands.

The GAO report recommends that the Department strengthen its efforts to respond to the Department's 2010 report recommendations to improve employment and training opportunities for Native American veterans on tribal lands, and that the Secretary of Labor should take the following three actions:

1. Ensure it has a written strategy to position the agency to efficiently and effectively respond to the 2010 recommendations, including the identification of roles and responsibilities as well as goals, costs, and timeframes to complete their implementation.

As the report mentions, the Department has already begun addressing the recommendations in the 2010 report regarding Native American veterans on tribal lands. However, the Department agrees that additional actions should be taken and is working to develop a written strategy to address the recommendations that includes information about the roles, responsibilities, goals and costs of addressing the 2010 recommendations.

In order to develop a successful strategy to improve employment and training services for Native American veterans living on tribal lands, the Department must first gain a better understanding of the extent of unemployment and training gaps on reservations nationwide. This information along with demographics and other data are needed to establish a more comprehensive plan of action. However the lack of current data undermines the Department's ability to determine the measure and urgency of need for this population nationwide. As mentioned in the GAO report, "BIA's *American Indian Population and Labor Report* is the only regularly collected source of poverty and unemployment data on all U. S. reservations. The *Indian Employment, Training and Related Services Demonstration Act of 1992* require the Secretary of the Interior, in consultation with the Secretary of Labor, to develop, maintain and publish, not less than biennially, a report

on the population eligible for services provided by the Secretary to Indian people, including information by gender, age, availability to work, and employment.” The last BIA Report was published in 2005. In the development of a strategy to address needs of Native American veterans on tribal lands, the Department looks forward to the next report from the Department of Interior (DOI) as the last report is now eight years old. The Department also looks forward to collaborating with DOI as they prepare the report.

Despite the reported lack of jobs, unskilled workforce and high unemployment on reservations, many veterans living on tribal lands seek employment there. These are difficult challenges, but the Department believes that it can do more to address them.

2. Identify and disseminate lessons learned and promising practices from DOL and other agencies’ efforts. To identify such lessons or practices, DOL could:
 - a. Review efforts by Jobs for Veterans State Grant (JVSG) grantees to improve Disabled Veteran Outreach Program Specialist (DVOP) and Local Veterans Employment Representative (LVER) outreach, such as the use of mobile units to conduct outreach on tribal lands and
 - b. Review DOL’s portfolio of employment and training grants and guidance related to economic development for application to JVSG and Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Section 166 grantees.

The Department agrees with this recommendation. There is evidence that DVOPs and LVERs are successfully providing outreach and services to Native American veterans on reservations in some states. As mentioned in the report, we will review their practices to determine which are effective and which can be used by staff in other states to facilitate more DVOP and LVER services on reservations. It is important to keep in mind that some practices that are successfully implemented in one state may not be effectively applied in other states due to the regulatory and cultural disparity across the states and the tribes respectively.

Successful collaboration and implementation of practices hinges largely on the relationships between the tribe and the state. Some DVOPs and LVERs have established working relationships with tribes, but these are informal and different from place to place. The Department agrees that it must continuously work to foster the government-to-government relationship with tribes so that we can align resources to address the needs of this population.

The Employment and Training Administration’s Division of Indian and Native American Programs (DINAP) assists in addressing the poverty, unemployment, training, and educational needs of American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians through managing the WIA Section 166 grant program. As such, ETA already reviews DOL’s portfolio of employment and training grants and guidance related to economic development for application to WIA Section 166 grantees. As mentioned in the report, through DINAP’s current efforts to improve grantees’ awareness of economic development opportunities, WIA Section 166 grantees have been successful in competing for grants that align employment and training resources with economic development needs, such as Career Pathways and the Workforce Innovation Fund. DINAP then visited those grantees to review lessons learned, and held National Conferences for WIA Section 166 grantees which provided a platform where best practices could be shared.

DINAP will continue to review lessons learned through ETA's portfolio of economic development related grants and guidance, and how they can be applied to WIA Section 166 grantees. DINAP is also committed to working with VETS to assess how lessons learned through ETA's portfolio can be incorporated into JVSG grants to better serve the Native American veteran population.

3. Expand collaboration with other agencies to leverage agency resources. This effort could include working through the Advisory Committee for Veterans Employment, Training and Employer Outreach (ACVETEO) and other efforts, strengthening relationships with agencies that also serve Native American veterans, such as DOD, VA, SBA, and BIA as well as building relationships with other agencies that serve Native American veterans, such as Education and HHS.

The Department agrees with this recommendation. We have found that collaboration with other agencies has been an effective approach to addressing Native American veterans on tribal lands and we look forward to improving these working relationships with the VA, BIA, DOD as well as the Native American community. VETS will have an initial FY2014 meeting with the VA on October 7, to discuss how to more effectively leverage our collaboration with other stakeholders about serving Native American Veterans on tribal lands. VETS will also propose at the first meeting of the ACVETEO in FY 2014, that a subcommittee be established to advise them on issues and services to Native American veterans on tribal lands

In conclusion, the Department looks forward to continuing to work with other agencies, state and local partners, Native American and tribal leaders, as well as others, to develop a clear plan to improve employment and training services to veterans living on tribal lands.

Sincerely,



Keith Kelly

Appendix V: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Andrew Sherrill, (202) 512-7215 or sherrilla@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Brett Fallavollita (Assistant Director), Michelle Bracy, and Christopher Morehouse made key contributions to this report. In addition, key support was provided by James Bennett, Sarah Cornetto, Holly Dye, Kathy Leslie, and Jean McSween.

Related GAO Products

VA and IHS: Further Action Needed to Collaborate on Providing Health Care to Native American Veterans. [GAO-13-354](#). Washington, D.C.: April 26, 2013.

Entrepreneurial Assistance: Opportunities Exist to Improve Programs' Collaboration, Data-Tracking, and Performance Management. [GAO-13-452T](#). Washington, D.C.: March 20, 2013.

Veterans' Employment and Training: Better Targeting, Coordinating, and Reporting Needed to Enhance Program Effectiveness. [GAO-13-29](#). Washington, D.C.: December 13, 2012.

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