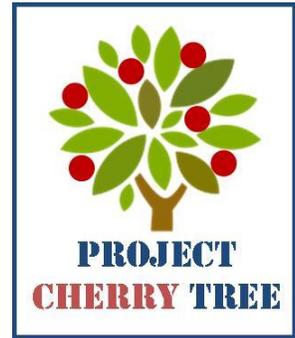


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PRESS RELEASE:

Project Cherry Tree Gains State and Federal Support

Project officials meet with state leadership, federal legislators and key VA officials

TRAVERSE CITY, MI – A delegation of team officials from the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians and Grand Traverse County recently traveled to Washington, DC to gain support for Project Cherry Tree. Project Cherry Tree is a coalition of community leaders in northern Michigan who are building strategies on how to better serve our veterans and attract other veterans to the 25-county region with a wide range of services, new opportunities, and an exceptional quality of life. Local officials met with leaders from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Senators Stabenow and Peters, and Congressman Benishek along with Governor Snyder’s senior federal policy representative. The DC trip was precipitated by a meeting with Governor Snyder’s Strategy Director and the Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency in Lansing.

The purpose of the trip was to gather their support of the initiative to bring easier access to healthcare, housing and job opportunities, and educational assistance for veterans in Northern Michigan. “America’s veterans and especially those of us living here in Northern Michigan deserve much better access to services,” says David Mikowski, Executive Director for Project Cherry Tree and Vietnam War Veteran.

The timing of the effort is reinforced by the recently released federal Commission on Care report that recommends overhauling the VA’s 75-year old model by streamlining and establishing a high-performing, integrated community healthcare network system – a partnership of the VA with local hospitals. Project Cherry Tree

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is seeking VA endorsement to become a “pilot” program that could be replicated nationally in other rural markets like northern Michigan. Project officials are leveraging the report recommendations to develop partnerships throughout the business and education community that address the challenges of delivering services to veterans in coordinate everything from health care to housing. The Project is even interested in developing a national cemetery here.

“We have to find better ways to serve the veterans we have across our 25-county rural area and attract returning veterans. Veterans provide the qualities of character, courage, and commitment as well as valuable skills that our communities need to flourish,” says Mikowski. A 2015 study conducted by Rand Corporation for the US Veterans Affairs Department states that unique rural areas in the nation, including northern Michigan, will remain areas with rural veteran populations that could benefit from continued or expanded services. But, he says, “Veterans won’t stay here if we can’t provide access to quality health care, housing, good paying jobs, and an opportunity to further their education.”

Tom Menzel, Grand Traverse County Administrator, said, “we are working to get federal and state officials to be thinking about northern Michigan as a veterans’ destination point; a “go-to” region. This is a center point of why Project Cherry Tree was established - to position our region with a strong partnership with the state and the VA.”

Project Cherry Tree received a major boost locally in August when the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians provided a \$50,000 grant. The funds are being used for project outreach and will be leveraged for additional funding needed for the five main initiatives: healthcare, jobs, education, housing, and national cemetery.

Roughly 10% of the state’s total veteran population of 650,000 lives in northern Michigan. On average, a veteran living up here has to travel upwards of 300 miles round trip to make an appointment at the nearest VA medical center in Saginaw. Expected changes at the VA will increase that travel to a 500 mile, 8-hour trip. Veterans in the Eastern Upper Peninsula endure even longer trips. One of Project Cherry Tree’s premises is simple: health care that is the closest is the best. Why not support local health systems’ efforts to make it easier for veterans to access healthcare at one of northern Michigan’s hospitals as opposed to driving south?

Project Cherry Tree is a coalition of many healthcare providers, educational institutions, employers, and many other groups already serving vets in our region. Next step for Project Cherry Tree is to leverage this unified support

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and work with the new VA contacts. By accessing existing VA programs that address the challenges, including supporting the healthcare systems in northern Michigan as they work on existing and new models of care with the VA, Project Cherry Tree will transform northern Michigan into one of the best places in the country for returning veterans. Project officials hope to have parts of the Cherry Tree up and running within the next 12 months or sooner.■

ATTACHMENT: Photograph taken September 22, 2016. From left to right: Mark Wilson, Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa & Chippewa Indians Tribal Councilor; Tom Menzel, Grand Traverse County Administrator; Sam McClellan, Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa & Chippewa Indians Chairman; Senator Debbie Stabenow, Senator Gary Peters, John Sych, Grand Traverse County Planning & Development Director; David Mikowski, Project Cherry Tree Executive Director; and, Ed Smith, Retired Executive, Accenture.

