

Wellness stressed at annual Veterans Conference

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
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Red Rock veteran Stand Down aims to help homeless vets across country

The New Mexico Department of Veterans' Services hosted the Fourth Annual Veterans Conference at Red Rock Park Nov. 1-2.

The two-day event included multiple guest speakers on topics related to health and wellness, meals for conference visitors and a 5K Fun Run/Walk on Nov. 1.

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Veterans, along with their families and friends, visited information booths from organizations like AARP, Western Sky Community Care and Octavia Fellin Public Library to learn about local services such as military surplus, housing, employment, vaccination and overall well-being.

Registered veterans participated in a Stand Down, a grassroots, community-based intervention program designed to help homeless veterans across the country by giving them the opportunity to renew their spirit, health and overall sense of well-being.

Stand downs originated during the Vietnam War to provide safe retreats for units returning from combat operations. There were opportunities for troops to tend to personal hygiene, receive food and healthcare, and enjoy companionship in a safe environment at secure base camps.

The Stand Down at Red Rock Park was hosted by Echohawk Lefthand, who was also one of the speakers on wellness.

Lefthand said he was once asked to draw what he believed wellness to be. The exercise lead him to wonder where wellness came from in the first place.

He told the room there are four domains of wellness: mental, emotional, physical and spiritual.

“When they’re in balance, that’s where hózhó [harmony] is,” Lefthand said. “When one is off, all of them are off.”

Lefthand told the audience about his experiences with various people, and a mentor in his life. He detailed a time when his life took a dark turn and he fell into a depression because of what happened to someone he knew.

He described his experience of gradually losing interest in everything he did. He said he shut himself off from the people around him.

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Rather than confront and discuss what had happened to him, Lefthand said he repressed what he was going through.

“When we need to, why is it we don’t talk about suicide?” he asked the audience.

Lefthand, as well as another Stand Down speaker, Dorothy Hostetter of the Department of Veterans Affairs, both cited the importance of a support system made up of friends and family who are willing to support veterans when things get difficult.

Lefthand and Hostetter said organizations that specialize in support are also important for the health and wellbeing of veterans.

Hostetter said groups in Gallup like The Hózhó Center and Na’Nizhoozhi Center Inc., as well as programs like Goodwill’s Veteran Family Services, provide assistance with rental and utilities deposits and occupational therapy.

“[We should be] meeting people where they are at [to] help them meet their goals,” Hostetter said.

Vera John of the Veterans Conference planning committee said the event at Red Rock Park serves as a companion event to Operation Veterans Wellness, which has been held at Rio West Mall in July the past several years.

“[These events] try to help and encourage [veterans], and to provide self-help, too,” she said.

John said mental health assistance and information is provided at various centers across the county and in nearby communities. She mentioned the McKinley County Sheriff’s Office building and centers in Crownpoint, Shiprock, Fort Defiance, Ariz., and other nearby towns as examples.

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“Take care of yourself and your family,” John said during the conference. “When you’re well, you can help them, too.”

Lefthand also stressed the importance of self-care. He said while the emotional weight may be difficult to bear, people can learn to deal with their burdens as they endure them.

“You have to go through it, but you’re going to be OK,” Lefthand said. “You’re going to be OK.”

For more information on the state Department of Veterans Services, visit: www.nmdvs.org

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