



# Space for Healing

Native American tribe builds a landmark healthcare facility in Northeast Oklahoma

The Cherokee Nation recently broke ground on the largest healthcare facility in the tribal government's history.

The Tahlequah Outpatient Health Center is a 469,000 square-foot, \$200 million outpatient clinic that will improve healthcare access in the region and generate revenue for the Cherokee Nation. It will also allow the Nation to continue running and expanding a variety of governmental services.

Cherokee Nation Businesses, the for-profit entity of the sovereign Cherokee Nation, is providing oversight for the medical center construction, located in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. It broke ground in February 2017 and expects the project to be substantially complete by the end of September 2019.

"What we are doing here affects a lot of people. We are very proud of that, especially in terms of providing jobs," says W.C. Gernandt III, Senior Project Manager at Cherokee Nation Businesses. "That's one of our tribal leadership's main areas of focus—providing employment opportunities to help better tribal citizens, community members and our partners."

## WORKING THROUGH HURDLES

Unlike many Native American tribes in the United States, the Cherokee Nation does not have any reservation lands. It has what is known as "trust lands." All of its hospitality and gaming facilities must be on that trust land, which is approved by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The Tahlequah Outpatient Health Center is being built on trust land. Because the Cherokee Nation operates as a sovereign political entity, there are some key challenges associated with a project of this size and scope.

"Across the board, sovereignty is probably one of the most common issues we run into when we get into signing contracts," Gernandt says. "We cite that we're a sovereign nation and that you have to work with the Cherokee Nation, follow tribal law within the Cherokee Nation and resolve disputes in tribal court if necessary. There are instances when our potential partners take issue with acknowledging the guidelines associated with our tribal sovereignty."

The Cherokee Nation works with Native American-owned businesses, trusted vendors, contractors and partners to award contracts that honor its sovereignty.

## Cherokee Nation Businesses

SENIOR PROJECT  
MANAGER II  
W.C. Gernandt III

LOCATION  
Catoosa, Oklahoma

"We have our legal department work with potential vendors, respective partners and representatives to accomplish an equitable agreement that does not threaten our sovereignty and our rights, and that also addresses our potential partners' interests," Gernandt says.

Working with repeat operators allows the Cherokee Nation to develop strong relationships with entities already familiar with operating under a unique arrangement.

"We have Tribal Employment Rights Office (TERO)-certified partners that can contract quickly because they are familiar with our laws, policies and regulations associated with our sovereignty," Gernandt says.

The Nation always works to respect its rich heritage, culture and history while developing on its tribal lands.

"One of our biggest hurdles is always the historical aspects because we are building within our tribal nation boundaries, where we have a lot of historical sites and events," Gernandt says. "Also, with having historical buildings, one of the main focuses is performing archeological and contaminant studies, testing and reporting to make sure that all our sites and buildings are safe and compliant with the state, local and federal codes and regulations and cultural interests."

#### SERVING A COMMUNITY

The Tahlequah Outpatient Health Center spans four stories and features over 240 exam rooms. It will feature both primary care space and specialty care space, including ambulatory surgery.

"There are primary care and specialty care wings. That's how we're looking at it from a construction standpoint," Gernandt says. "We are focusing on completing the specialty care wing. Our strategy is to achieve substantial completion by the end of September. However, our priority is the specialty care wing and then completing the primary care side."

As part of the construction process, the Cherokee Nation is making roadway improvements throughout the area.

"With the adjacent road improvements is an upgrade to the existing utilities, which is not only going to benefit us but also benefit our neighbors and the City of Tahlequah. The utilities are getting upgraded," Gernandt says. "It

helps provide some more opportunities for the surrounding community to have updated water, power and gas services."

Honoring the Cherokee Nation's longstanding commitment to environmental preservation, the project team expects the new outpatient facility to meet or exceed LEED® Silver standards.

"We are investigating at least nine more possible points that would put us at LEED Gold," Gernandt says. "We're analyzing the ability to achieve that as we get closer to the project's completion."

The economic impact of the new facility is providing the Tahlequah community with renewed vigor.

"We are creating 800 new employment opportunities in Tahlequah for healthcare professionals," Gernandt says. "That's also going to relate to an increase in the population, which is an increase of the local tax base. The increase in revenue right now in the local economy, through lodging, dining, shopping, fuel and building materials, is already being realized now." 

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