

VA holds its first Tribal Advisory Council meeting

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WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — Navajo Nation Veterans Administration Executive Director James Zwierlein participated in the first official U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Tribal Advisory Council meeting in late January.

In October 2021, Zwierlein, a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps, was appointed by U.S. Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough to serve on the VA's Tribal Advisory Committee, along with 14 other representatives that make up the first-ever Advisory Committee within the VA.

The work of the Tribal Advisory Council is essential in developing innovative ways to serve Navajo veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

Working together with the Navajo Nation Veterans Advisory Council, and other Navajo veterans, Director Zwierlein's role is important to conveying to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs the unique challenges Native American veterans face and propose the solutions that will address them.

The Tribal Advisory Council offers tribal leaders and Native American veterans an unprecedented voice in policies, services, and programs, and will provide advice and guidance to the VA Secretary on all matters relating to tribal organizations and Native American veterans.

The meeting was held virtually with attendees across the country. A *VA 101 Overview* was presented to the Tribal Advisory Council, outlining the various bureaus of the VA such as the Veterans Benefits Administration, Veterans Health Administration, and National Cemetery Administration, that provide various benefits, health care, and burial services to veterans.

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“It’s reassuring to learn that the issues facing Navajo veterans regarding access to benefits and healthcare from the Federal VA are not unique to the Navajo Nation alone,” Zwierlein said. “Having a team of knowledgeable advocates who are experiencing the same issues impacting Native American veterans across the United States allows for a greater merging of the minds to find appropriate solutions and recommendations to Secretary McDonough.”

Under the leadership of Zwierlein, the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration is also in the process of applying for federal recognition under the federal VA for the purpose of VA claims representation, similar to the recognition of state organizations.

If approved, it would allow Navajo Nation employees to become accredited as a County Veterans’ Service Officer to assist veterans with benefit claims.

During the meetings, Zwierlein was also selected to serve as chair of the sub-committee for the Veterans Benefits Administration, and the co-chair of our Administrative sub-committee.

“I’m looking forward to being able to help facilitate greater collaborative efforts and make real change for our Navajo veterans,” he said.

Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez continues to offer his support for Navajo veterans, Navajo Nation Veterans Advisory Council, and Zwierlein as they continue to collaborate and advocate for policy changes within the Navajo Nation and the federal level.

“We are stronger together,” Nez said. “When we advocate for policy changes at the federal level, we have to present a united voice on all issues. Under the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration, they are working with partners to construct homes for Navajo veterans. They will soon complete a new home for a Navajo veteran and more are in progress. We congratulate Director Zwierlein on his new appointments within the Tribal Advisory Council.”

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