

Navajo Nation Veterans Administration recognized as a tribal veteran service organization

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Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez joined U.S. Veterans Secretary Denis R. McDonough in Gallup on June 28 as he officially recognized the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration as a tribal veteran service organization that meets the criteria and standards to be accredited under the Tribal Representation Expansion Program, to assist veterans with benefit and pension claims. The Navajo Nation is the very first tribal nation to earn such recognition in the entire country.

Among many requirements that had to be met through the U.S. Veterans Affairs' application process, under the leadership of Director James Zwierlein the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration had to demonstrate its capability, resources, and commitment to maintain a policy to provide complete claims services to veterans.

“This is a milestone achievement for the entire Navajo Nation and a big step forward for Navajo veterans. When the United States called upon our people to protect and serve, our Diné warriors answered that call and kept their promise,” Nez said.

Nez commented on the fact that before, many Navajo veterans had to travel far distances to receive VA benefits.

“For many years, our Navajo veterans have traveled long distances to file claims for federal VA benefits,” Nez said. “Through the hard work of Navajo Veterans Administration Director James Zwierlein and his team, progress is being made and we are seeing results. We also thank Secretary McDonough for his support and for coming to our region to hear from Navajo veterans.”

Zwierlein reported that five staff members under the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration are now accredited to process benefits claims for veterans. Since May 2, they have taken in and submitted 83 claims into the federal VA system. With the accreditation, the employees are able to represent the claims on behalf of the veterans. In the past, Navajo veterans had to travel to VA centers located off the Navajo Nation to submit claims.

Prior to the ceremony, Nez spoke about the importance of providing more expansive health and clinical services for Navajo veterans during a meeting held at the Community-Based Outpatient Clinic, where many Navajo veterans go for health care services and treatment. The group also took a tour of the facility and met with the health care workers.

During the Secretary’s visit, the federal VA announced that four Community-Based Outpatient Clinics for veterans in Gallup, Las Vegas, Raton, and Española in the state of New Mexico will remain open. On March 14, the Asset and Infrastructure Review Commission recommended the closure of the four CBOC’s, resulting from the 2018 VA MISSION Act, which required the Department of Veterans Affairs to research, develop and publish a list of recommendations intended to modernize VA medical facilities and health care delivery including through facility expansions, relocations, closures or changes in services.

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Nez also joined Secretary McDonough, U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-N.M., and U.S. Rep. Teresa Leger Fernández, D-N.M., for a town hall at the UNM-Gallup campus, where they heard from veterans, members of the Navajo Nation Veterans Advisory Council, state leaders, and tribal leaders regarding health care and benefits claims and the need for expansive care for traditional healing and mental health services. New Mexico State Sen. Shannon Pinto and Reps. Wonda Johnson and Anthony Allison were in attendance to offer their support for veterans. Navajo Nation Veterans Advisory Council members were also in attendance including Billy Goodman, Gabriella Mehl, Vern R. Lee, Linda Onesalt, and Elouise Brown.

In March, Nez and Zwierlein, who was selected last year to serve on the federal VA's Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs, met with Congressional leaders to advocate for the establishment of the proposed veterans benefits outreach center and a veterans hospital that would provide clinical and mental health services to help Native American veterans with PTSD and other health care issues.

"I appreciate all of our Navajo veterans who came out to speak about their concerns and issues directly to Secretary McDonough and our congressional leaders. We also thank the Biden-Harris administration for keeping their word to have a seat at the table for the Navajo Nation. We have a lot of great momentum on veterans issues and we will continue working together to move forward to help our Diné warriors," Nez said.

The group also visited the Gallup Indian Medical Center where they received updates on veterans health care and efforts to improve the health care system for Navajo people from Navajo Area IHS Director Roselyn Tso. Officials also spoke about efforts to construct a new hospital facility to replace the current Gallup Indian Medical Center.

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