



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Health, Education, and Human Services Committee receives concerning report regarding Navajo Nation veteran's issues

WINDOW ROCK – On Monday, the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee received a report from members of Navajo veterans organizations from Tohatchi Chapter, Blue Gap Chapter, Central Agency Veterans Organization, Fort Defiance Agency Veterans Organization, and the Navajo Nation Veterans Advisory Council.

The report highlighted critical concerns from Navajo veteran organizations, in which they are seeking the assistance of the HEHSC to aid in developing resolutions to ongoing issues regarding the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration and Advisory Council—both of which are under the Office of the President and Vice President.

In Jan. 2016, the Navajo Nation Council unanimously approved the Navajo Nation Veterans Act and President Russell Begaye signed the Act into law in Feb. 2016. The Act ensured that the Veterans Administration would provide enhanced outreach, services, and benefits to Navajo veterans, and the Veterans Advisory Council would allow veteran participation in policy matters and data system development regarding veterans issues at the central government level.

Tohatchi Veterans Organization commander and Fort Defiance Veterans Agency Organization vice commander Olin Kieyoomia, provided a written report to committee members regarding concerns with insufficient funding for housing and burial assistance, lack of staff support for the program, and adding that there has been no significant improvement of services for Navajo veterans.

HEHSC chair Council Delegate Jonathan Hale said he had also received concerns from his chapter's veteran's organizations, and said he understands that there has been a "lack of movement" with the development of the Veterans Administration and Advisory Council.

"Things aren't functioning the way it should be, and we are over here putting out fires again. It's ridiculous. Thank you for your advocacy and the policies that you want to change. I encourage you to define what it is you want, and we will go from there, even if you have to develop your own criteria for services like housing," said Delegate Hale.

According to the written report, Keiyoomia said President Begaye appointed OPVP staff assistant Jamescita Peshlakai as the interim executive director for the Veterans Administration because the program manager of the now dissolved Department of Navajo Veterans Affairs had resigned in Sept. 2016.

He added that the transition to the Veterans Administration has resulted in a lack of communication between the OPVP and Navajo veterans, and provided no authority to veterans that sit on the Advisory Council. The Advisory Council was established to voice guidance to the OPVP to ensure the efficient care of Navajo veterans and their families, and to further advocate on the veterans' behalf.

"All veterans were given the opportunity to speak and give suggestions, but now we are not following the [Veterans Act], and the Navajo Department of Justice is interpreting the Act in favor of the Executive Branch's views and not the views or intentions of the veterans that gave testimony to the act," said Keiyoomia. "The veterans are asking that [the OPVP] honor the testimonies of the veterans."

He added that the Navajo veterans advised the OPVP against making the executive director position for the Veterans Administration a political appointment, and that it should be a contracted position in which the veterans are involved in the selection process. President Begaye politically appointed the current interim executive director and veterans now have concerns regarding the nature of the appointment, said Keiyoomia.

Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty (Beclabito, Cove, Gadi'i'áhi/To'Koi, Red Valley, Tooh Haltsooi, Toadlena/Two Grey Hills, Tsé ałnáoz't'í) recommended a directive to request a report from the acting director of the Veterans Administration, to address the concerns of the Navajo veterans and to provide clarification on the issues that were presented by the Navajo veterans.

"It would give [Peshlakai] enough time to respond and to make any recommendations. As the oversight committee, we are also in charge of overlooking this program. How can we neutralize this political arena to streamline the issue and make the necessary changes happen? We have to better assist our Navajo veterans as best we can," said Delegate Crotty.

In addition to the proposed directive, the committee also requested that the Veterans Administration provide a detailed budget report for the program and its services, as well as the status of the veterans housing program and the backlog of veteran's assistance checks.

Delegate Hale said the report from the Veterans Administration would be provided at the upcoming HEHSC meeting on Dec. 12.

HEHSC members voted 4-0 to accept the report and approve the directives.

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