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Health, Education, and Human Services Committee receive update report on Veterans Housing Program

WINDOW ROCK – The Health, Education, and Human Services Committee received an update report on Monday from the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration, regarding the Veterans Housing Program. The report focused on issues pertaining to funding, policy and procedures, and contracts to complete the construction of the homes for selected Navajo veterans.

In 2013, the Navajo Nation Council approved Resolution No. CS-48-13, sponsored by Council Delegate Alton Joe Shepherd (Jeddito, Cornfields, Ganado, Kin Dah Lichíí, Steamboat), which amended the Navajo Nation Veterans Trust Fund policy to provide funding for the construction of new homes for veterans in each of Nation's five agencies.

HEHSC member Council Delegate Nelson S. BeGaye (Lukachukai, Rock Point, Round Rock, Tsaile/Wheatfields, Tsé Ch'izhí), said the committee has worked diligently to keep the veterans administration accountable, referring to a directive made in a previous meeting for the Veterans Administration to meet with the Office of the President and Vice President, Office of the Controller, and the Office of Management and Budget.

"There was a directive made by this body here to have the three entities get together to find exactly what is going on and where we are at," said Delegate Nelson S. BeGaye. "In FY2015, you were allocated \$4.6 million and overspent \$200,000. I like what that says there, however there were two more allocations of about \$4.3 million [for FY2016 and FY2017], but it doesn't say how it was used or if anything was overspent."

The report states that approximately \$10.5 million was restricted for use to construct new homes for FY2017 and FY2018, due to audit findings that required the deficiencies to be corrected before funding is released.

The Veterans Administration, under the Office of the President and Vice President, had issues that were outlined in an audit report produced by the Office of the Auditor General in 2017. The report contained audit findings including the lack of financial and expenditure documentation, lack of quality homes built, veteran eligibility issues, and veterans' dissatisfaction upon receiving their completed homes.

As a result, Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay, Jr. (Low Mountain, Many Farms, Nazlini, Tachee/Blue Gap, Tselani/Cottonwood) introduced legislation to establish the Veterans Housing Program to oversee the operation and administration of funding for the veterans homes, which was approved by the Navajo Nation Council in July.

Since the outcome of the audit findings, the committee has met with the Veterans Administration on a monthly basis to ensure the audit deficiencies are corrected and that the program amended their plan of operation and policy and procedures, which were approved earlier this year.

HEHSC member Council Delegate Steven Begay (Coyote Canyon, Mexican Springs, Naschitti, Tohatchi, Bahastl'a'a'), said is he disappointed with unpaid housing construction contracts owed to the Southwest Indian Foundation for providing homes to veterans, and said he is concerned that the company could halt construction of homes if they are not paid.

"This happens continually within the Navajo Nation. We enter into contracts and then we become negligent with those contracts. Then thereafter, we are begging to allow programs to enter into contracts to get work done and businesses don't want to deal with the Nation because of the ongoing problem. All we need to do is provide technical assistance to provide the guidance necessary to carry out internal policy. That's my concern today," said Delegate Steven Begay.

Delegate Steven Begay said the Office of the President and Vice President need to ensure that the Veterans Administration has paid out on the contracts, and to provide a definitive answer to the committee as to when the contracts would be paid in full.

A directive was recommended by Delegate Nelson S. BeGaye to the Veterans Administration, Office of the President and Vice President, Office of the Controller, and the Office of Management and Budget to provide a breakdown in the actual funding allocated, the release of the \$10.5 million and if it accrued any interest, and to provide a response to the committee's concerns regarding contracts with vendors. HEHSC members voted 3-0 to approve the directive.

"Construction season is almost over and a new Council will be coming in January. Will the new Council support this initiative, or will they scratch out this budget? We need to get this going and finish it up because we don't want this project to be incomplete," said Delegate Nelson S. BeGaye. "We know funding has either been allocated or has not been released, and it needs to be clarified."

With a vote of 3-0, HEHSC members accepted the update report from the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration. The program will provide another report on the status of the directive to the committee at a later date.

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