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SEPTEMBER 29, 2016

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## VICE PRESIDENT NEZ SAYS MOU IS WORKING FOR INDIAN COUNTRY AT VA CONSULTATION MEETING



At the consultation, Vice President Nez said the VA is not in sync with the perspective of the NIHB. “Right now, we are against the consolidation and would like to stay with the MOA in place between the VA and IHS facilities,” Vice President Nez said.

WASHINGTON D.C.-The Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) facilitated a tribal consultation on Wednesday, Sep, 28, to discuss the consolidation of multiple community care programs into one standard program that utilizes standard rates.

The VA sought tribal consultation regarding how tribal health programs participate in the core provider network, and potentially transitioning from the current reimbursement agreement structure to a model under which tribal health programs deliver care to all eligible, VA enrolled Veterans using a standard reimbursement rate.

In consulting with the National Indian Health Board (NIHB), Vice President Nez said the VA is not in sync with the perspective of the NIHB. The consolidation process the VA wants to implement institutes a co-pay system which will essentially slow the process.

“Right now, we are against the consolidation and would like to stay with the MOA in place between the VA and IHS facilities,” Vice President Nez said. “The implementation of a co-pay system is outrageous. Paying a co-pay violates the government’s responsibility to provide health care to Native American tribes and veterans.”

The whole point of the MOU was to help Native American veterans feel more comfortable getting service at IHS facilities rather than having to travel to outside VA hospitals.

Vice President Jonathan Nez said he agreed with many of the comments made by tribal leaders at the consultation, those who sit on various tribal health committees, STAC, NIHB.

"This MOU is working in Indian Country. I appreciate Dr. Richard Stone, Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Health, mentioning that what is being proposed in this consultation is not a done deal," Vice President Nez said. "The Navajo Nation is large and holds many complexities in how it is based in three states. If this MOU were to go away, it would set Navajo way back."

The vice president noted that the Navajo Nation had passed the Veterans Act earlier this year. The act is the first of its kind across Indian Country and established a freestanding Veterans Administration Office under the Executive Branch that serves to streamline the administrative process in delivering health care and benefits to Navajo veterans.

The act was critical in establishing an MOU between the Navajo Nation and the Arizona Veterans Service Department that helped to facilitate the sharing of administrative infrastructure between the two agencies.

In being able to access this infrastructure, Veterans agencies on the Navajo Nation are now able to access and process documents to assist veterans without having to send them to off-reservation Veterans service agencies.

Through this MOU the Navajo Nation has been able to bring services to rural parts of the Nation like Tuba City, Chinle, Pinon and now Kayenta.

President Russell Begaye said that if the MOU were to get changed dramatically or go away, it would set the Nation back, in that the services that veterans currently access in rural communities might not exist.

"Our veterans will have to drive to Prescott, Albuquerque and Salt Lake City, the areas where the main offices are in those states," he said. "This is concerning for all of us here. Our veterans will have to travel hundreds of miles for service."

The consolidation would also implement at counter rate vs. an all-inclusive rate. A counter rate being solely inclusive of service from the doctor and an all-inclusive rate including a percentage of costs associated with overhead to support the facilities.

NIHB supports the all-inclusive rate to put funds toward the IHS or other facilities the veterans utilize. The VA wants to stay with counter rates.

"Along with the NIHB, we are fighting for the veterans," Vice President Nez said. "This is not the end, this is the beginning and it's something that President Obama could still support before the end of his term."

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