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Health, Education, and Human Services Committee reviews audit findings for the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration

WINDOW ROCK – On Monday, the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee considered Legislation No. 0209-17, to accept an internal audit of the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration's Veterans Housing Program and approving a corrective action plan, to address audit deficiencies. The NNVA is under the Office of the President and Vice President.

According to the legislation, the audit was conducted by the Office of the Auditor General to verify that the NNVA is in compliance with financial policies and laws, as well as to ensure that the program is meeting the goals of providing adequate housing to Navajo veterans, per Navajo Nation Council resolution CS-48-13. The resolution was approved by the Council in 2013 and established the Veterans Housing Program.

The resolution states that four-percent of the Navajo Nation's annual revenues be deposited into the Navajo Nation Veterans Trust Fund, and two-percent of the allocation would go toward funding up to 15 homes in each of the five Navajo area agencies for four years. The sunset clause for the housing initiative is set for Dec. 2017.

The audit report found eight findings that need immediate attention, which include the lack of financial and expenditure documentation for approximately $1.9 million, quality of houses built, veteran eligibility issues, and veterans' dissatisfaction upon receiving their completed homes.

HEHSC member Council Delegate Nelson S. BeGaye (Lukachukai, Rock Point, Round Rock, Tsaile/Wheatfields, Tsé Ch' izhi) raised concerns regarding the failure to purchase building materials from local Navajo businesses, houses being built without power or water lines connected to the homes, and the role of the Office of the President and Vice President in regards to the housing program.

"I think we need to include language to have the OPVP's chief of staff to ensure the deficiencies found in the audit report are corrected," said Delegate BeGaye. "I also have an issue with the NNVA still without an executive director, and it bothers me that many programs only have acting directors. This needs to change and we need permanent people in those positions."

Delegate BeGaye recommended an amendment requesting that the OPVP chief of staff oversee the CAP to ensure that the findings are corrected. HEHSC members voted 4-1 to approve the amendment.

HEHSC member Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty (Beclabito, Cove, Gadi'i'áhi/To'Koi, Red Valley, Tooh Haltsooi, Toadlena/Two Grey Hills, Tsé ałnáoz't'l'í) voted in opposition of the amendment stating that the NNVA housing program is already the responsibility of the OPVP and cautioned committee members from micromanaging Navajo programs.

"I don't see any reason for the amendment because the NNVA housing program is already the responsibility of the OPVP and chief of staff. This is another example of Council correcting an OPVP issue. We spend too much time fixing administrative matters when our roles as lawmakers should be focused on policy issues and changes," said Delegate Crotty.

HEHSC chair and legislation sponsor Council Delegate Jonathan Hale (Oak Springs, St. Michaels) recommended a directive to the OPVP to develop an interest-earning account for any unused funding while the CAP is in progress, look into utilizing local Navajo businesses to construct homes, develop legislation to extend the sunset clause, and to provide a report on the current status of the veterans homes and construction, as well as an explanation of the $1.9 million utilized to purchase materials.

HEHSC members voted 5-0 to approve Legislation No. 0209-17, accepting the audit report of the Veterans Housing Program, with one amendment and one directive. The legislation moves forward to the Budget and Finance Committee, which serves as the final authority for the bill.

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