23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL
OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
September 11, 2017

MEDIA CONTACTS
Jared Touchin (928) 221-9253
Jolene Holgate (928) 380-4174
Crystalyne Curley (928) 286-7918
nnlb.communications@gmail.com

Law and Order Committee supports amending Veterans Trust Fund language to provide more funding for Navajo veterans

WINDOW ROCK – During a special meeting on Monday, the Law and Order Committee issued its support for Legislation No. 0343-17, which seeks the Navajo Nation Council's approval of the Navajo Nation Veterans Trust Fund Income Act that would amend Title 12 section 1171 (A) and 1175 (A)(B) of the Navajo Nation Code.

Legislation co-sponsor Council Delegate Seth Damon (Bááháálí, Chichiltah, Manuelito, Tsé Lichíí', Rock Springs, Tsayatoh) stated purpose of the legislation is to amend and clarify existing definitions contained within the establishment of the Veterans Trust Fund to provide additional funds for the benefit of Navajo veterans.

"Approving the Navajo Nation Veterans Trust Fund Income Act would provide the availability of additional funds for veteran services. This legislation answers how to increase the veterans' benefits. Every year, Council considers one-time supplemental funding for veterans, but sometimes there would be no money available for them. This legislation would avoid one-time funding and clarify the definitions of 'principal' and 'income,'" stated Delegate Damon.

Delegate Damon added, "Currently, there are many confusions of the definitions of 'principal' and 'income', which makes it harder to help the veterans with more funding."

Council Delegate Tom Chee (Shiprock), who is the primary sponsor of the bill, asked the LOC for their support and noted that the legislation is supported by many veterans who he worked with to develop the amended language.

According to the legislation, the trust fund principal would consist of all supplemental appropriations and the trust fund income would consist of all earnings, which includes interest and other earnings generated by the principal and income of the fund, along with the set asides by the Council.

LOC member Council Delegate Otto Tso (Tó Nines Dizi) asked how much was funded for veteran services in the past years.

In response to a question posed by LOC member Council Delegate Otto Tso (Tó Nines Dizi) regarding past funding for veterans, Delegate Damon explained that approximately $1.8 million was equally distributed among the five Navajo veteran agencies in 2015, and approximately $3.1

million in 2016, which is determined by the interest income from the principal of the fund – not including other generated earnings.

Delegate Damon added, “If the legislation is approved, veterans would have more funds available because of the amended definition of income, which would include interest and earnings. Currently, only the interest income of the revenues is dispersed among the five veteran agencies.”

LOC member Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay, Jr. (Low Mountain, Many Farms, Nazlini, Tachee/Blue Gap, Tselani/Cottonwood), stated that Navajo veterans should be entitled to all available benefits and services.

“According to the law, the Navajo Nation [Veterans Administration] is mandated to construct 15 homes and to provide renovation and repairs for Navajo veterans, but that is not happening. We receive criticism at the chapter level over how the veterans department and veterans fund is managed,” said Delegate Begay.

The Law and Order Committee approved Legislation No. 0343-17 with a 3-0 vote with one amendment and a directive for the Naabik’íyáti’ Committee to hold a work session regarding the legislation.

The bill now moves forward to the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee for further consideration. The Navajo Nation Council serves as the final authority for the bill.

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