



The 24TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL
Office of the Speaker

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Closure of Veteran Clinics across New Mexico opposed by Navajo Nation leaders

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PHOTO: Budget and Finance Committee Chairman Jamie Henio provides public testimony at the University of New Mexico-Gallup in opposition to the closure of four community-based outpatient veterans clinics.

GALLUP, N.M. — Members of the 24th Navajo Nation Council provide public testimony to oppose recommendations provided by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to the Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) Commission to close four community-based outpatient veterans clinics (CBOCs) located in Gallup, Las Vegas, Española, and Raton, NM.

Last week, Senator Ben Ray Lujan (D-NM) hosted a listening session on the VA recommendation that would impact the delivery of health care services to veterans in the state. Budget and Finance Chairman Jamie Henio and Madam Chair Amber Kanazbah Crotty joined Gallup Mayor Louie Bonaguidi, State Senator George Munoz, State Representative D. Wonda Johnson, and McKinley County Commissioner Genieve Jackson to provide testimony to representatives from the New Mexico Department of Veteran Services and VA Healthcare System Director Robert McKenrick.

“The Department of Veterans Affairs must fully consider the impact these closures will have on the health care services our Navajo veterans rely upon,” said Chairman Jamie Henio (Alamo, Ramah, Tóhajiilee). “This is unacceptable, and the VA should have consulted the 23 tribal nations across New Mexico before recommending closures. We have over 10,000 Navajo veterans, and these community-based outpatient clinics are where their health care needs are met. Shutting them down is not the answer.”

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According to the New Mexico Veterans Services Department, the state has the 9th largest percentage of veterans by population that is not concentrated in an urban area. Nearly half of New Mexico veterans are over 65 and often find it challenging to travel long distances for medical care due to service-related disabilities or illness.

To address this growing problem, Chairman Henio and the Navajo Nation Council will advocate for establishing a Veterans Affairs Hospital in the Navajo Nation. In April, legislative action was taken when over \$29 million in Sihazin Funds was allocated for the construction and first-year operations of a 60-bed veterans nursing home, called the Navajo Warriors Home, to be located in Chinle, Ariz.

“The Navajo Nation Council expresses its disappointment with the VA recommendation and opposes the closure of our community-based outpatient clinics. Washington D.C. must stop dictating what happens here at the local level. Gallup proudly claims to be the ‘Most Patriotic Small Town in the United States,’ yet this happens to our warriors and their families. Access to quality health care services for our veterans is the least we can do for the sacrifices they made for this country,” said Madam Chair Amber Kanazbah Crotty (Cove, Toadlena/Two Grey Hills, Red Valley, Tsé’ahnáoozt’í’í, Sheep Springs, Beclabito, Gad’ii’áhí/Tó Ko’í).

In April, Senators Martin Heinrich (D-NM) and Ben Ray Luján (D-NM) shared with Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough that the VA closure recommendations fail to fully account for the projected veteran demand, inadequate community care network, and the lack of telehealth services across northern New Mexico.

In a letter, Senators Heinrich and Luján added, “We believe that the proposed closures would hurt the service veterans receive and place a strain upon the other VA clinics and local providers in rural New Mexico. It is imperative that you and the AIR Commission panel hear firsthand how integral these clinics are to veterans living in rural and tribal communities in the state.”

Earlier today, Law and Order Chairwoman Eugenia Charles-Newton sponsored Legislation No. 0088-22 passed by the Naabik’iyáti Committee to oppose any closures and requests the VA to establish a Community-Based Outpatient Clinic or a VHA Healthcare Facility within the Navajo Nation.

The AIR Commission recommendations are the first step in a multi-year process where they suggest remodeling or building new facilities, moving or closing facilities, and changing services offered. Under federal law, all VA proposals must be reviewed by the commission, Congress, and President Biden.

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