



The Navajo Nation  
Office of the President and Vice President

CONTACTS:  
Jared Touchin, Communications Director  
(928) 274-4275  
Crystalyn Curley, Sr. Public Information Officer  
(928) 274-2758  
Timothy Benally, Public Information Officer  
(928) 871-7000  
[nnopvp.communications@gmail.com](mailto:nnopvp.communications@gmail.com)

---

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
May 5, 2022

## Navajo Nation Veterans Administration gains federal recognition through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs



**PHOTO:** Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez, First Lady Phefelina Nez, and Navajo Nation Veterans Administration Director James Zwierlein meeting with officials with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in Washington D.C. on Oct. 21, 2021.

**WINDOW ROCK, Ariz.** — On May 2, U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Denis McDonough officially recognized the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration as a tribal organization that meets the criteria and standards to be accredited under the Tribal Representation Expansion Program, to assist veterans with benefit claims. The Navajo Nation is the very first tribal nation to earn such recognition in the entire country.

Among many requirements that had to be met through the U.S. Veterans Affairs' application process, the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration had to demonstrate its capability, resources, and commitment to maintain a policy to provide complete claims services to veterans.

“This is a historic achievement for the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration and a big step forward for Navajo veterans. When the United States called upon our people to protect and serve, our Diné warriors answered that call and kept their part of the promise. For many years, we’ve heard from our Navajo veterans about the challenges of having to travel long distances to file claims for federal VA benefits. Through the hard work of Navajo Veterans Administration Director James Zwierlein and his team, progress is being made and we are seeing results. The construction of new homes for Navajo veterans is underway and now our veterans will be able to process federal claims closer to home,” said Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez.

On March 23, the federal VA hosted a tribal consultation session with tribes to gain input and feedback about the Tribal Representation Expansion Program, specifically in regards to access to representation for VA benefit claims.

“I love doing this job. Being able to improve the situation for our veterans is rewarding beyond words and being able to get things done without malicious interference. Imagine what we could accomplish if certain individuals weren’t constantly trying to keep me from doing my job under the law – we could be so much further along. The application process required substantial work, and Veterans Administration Deputy Director Hubert Smith was instrumental in helping to get our application across the finish line and approved. The staff from the VA Office of General Counsel were great. Together, the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration is the first tribal veteran service organization to be federally recognized by the federal VA. First, and for now, only one. Historic,” stated Navajo Veterans Administration Director Zwierlein, who was also selected last year, to serve on the federal VA’s Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs.

President Nez and Director Zwierlein have also met with U.S. Deputy Assistant Sec. for the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs Stephanie Birdwell, under the U.S. Department of Veterans, and U.S. House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Mark Takano (D-Calif.) to advocate for Navajo veterans and the construction of a veterans benefits outreach center to provide veterans services closer to the Navajo Nation.

“Recently, we visited the construction site of a new home for 89-year-old Korean War veteran, Kee C. Nez, which is being built through the Navajo Veterans Housing Program. More homes are under construction for Navajo veterans. Director Zwierlein and his staff members are producing results and building stronger relations at the federal and state levels to provide support for our Diné warriors,” added President Nez.

###

For the latest news from the Office of the President and Vice President, please visit <http://www.opvp.navajo-nsn.gov/> or find us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.