



The Navajo Nation
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President Nez meets with the federal VA Network Director and newly-appointed head of the New Mexico VA Healthcare System



PHOTO: Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez speaks with New Mexico VA Healthcare System Director Robert McKenrick at the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration office in Tse Bonito, N.M. on April 12, 2022.

TSE BONITO, N.M. – On Tuesday, Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and Navajo Veterans Administration Executive Director James Zwierlein met with Director for the VA Desert Pacific Healthcare Network, under the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Michael W. Fisher and newly-appointed Director of the New Mexico VA Healthcare System, retired U.S. Army Colonel Robert McKenrick, who oversees healthcare services for veterans in New Mexico.

The discussion focused on the need for a veterans' benefits outreach center to provide services such as health care for Navajo veterans closer to home. Currently, many Navajo veterans use their personal resources to travel long distances to VA clinics. With a population of over 10,000 Navajo

veterans, President Nez said the center could also provide clinical and mental health services to help Native American veterans with PTSD and other health care issues.

“Navajo veterans fought for this country and the federal government is obligated to provide services for them, just as other veterans. We’re doing our best to work together with state and federal officials to make benefits more accessible and efficient. We are also working with our federal partners to have a new hospital facility constructed to replace the old Gallup Indian Medical Center, and to incorporate a veterans’ clinic that can provide the specialized services, including mental health services, for veterans,” said President Nez.



The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs announced McKenrick’s appointment on March 22, to oversee the New Mexico VA Healthcare System that serves thousands of veterans. He previously served in several capacities working with veterans’ health care services, including as the Deputy Medical Center Director of the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System.

On March 29, President Nez and Director Zwierlein also met with Congressional members including U.S. House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Mark Takano (D-Calif.), to share their vision for the veterans’ benefits outreach center. Director Zwierlein, who serves on the VA Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs, is also working closely with other entities including Navajo Housing Authority to leverage additional funding resources to build the center.

“I thank Michael and Robert for coming out. It’s taken us a long time to get here and it’s unfortunate that it happens during election season. Our veterans deserve more than being used as political props. With a clear road ahead, and these new relationships, we can see a better future for our Navajo veterans within their lifetime. We are gaining serious momentum, and it would be extremely harmful to Navajo veterans to have our progress interrupted because of individuals who are not acting for the greater good of all veterans, but their own interests. I promised to fight for our veterans to get better access to VA healthcare and benefits. The fact that the VA is reaching out for visits and responding positively to our requests demonstrates that the Navajo Veterans Administration is making a difference. I thank the VA and all of its staff for listening and being an engaging partner to provide better services to veterans on the great Navajo Nation,” said Director Zwierlein.

The Nez-Lizer Administration will continue working with state and federal partners to support the priorities of Navajo veterans and the Navajo Nation Veterans Advisory Council.

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