



The Navajo Nation  
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**President Nez continues push for veterans  
benefits outreach center and veterans hospital**

**WINDOW ROCK, Ariz.** – On Monday, in a meeting with U.S. Veterans Secretary Denis R. McDonough, the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration was informed that four Community-Based Outpatient Clinics for veterans in Gallup, Las Vegas, Raton, and Española in the state of New Mexico will remain open. On March 14, the Asset and Infrastructure Review Commission recommended the closure of the four CBOC's, resulting from the 2018 VA MISSION Act, which required the Department of Veterans Affairs to research, develop and publish a list of recommendations intended to modernize VA medical facilities and health care delivery including through facility expansions, relocations, closures or changes in services.

“We thank Senators Martin Heinrich and Ben Ray Luján for taking a strong position on this issue and we look forward to continuing to work with them to provide even greater clinical and health care services for Navajo veterans closer to home. For some time, we have called for the establishment of a veterans benefits outreach center and a veterans hospital to provide services for veterans on the Navajo Nation. Gallup is the closest location, but with over 10,000 Navajo veterans, we need one that is even closer for the thousands that reside across the Navajo Nation,” said President Nez.

In March, President Nez and Navajo Veterans Administration Director James D. Zwierlein, who was selected last year to serve on the federal VA's Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs, met with Congressional leaders to advocate for the establishment of the proposed veterans benefits outreach center and a veterans hospital that would provide clinical and mental health services to help Native American veterans with PTSD and other health care issues.

On May 2, U.S. Secretary McDonough officially recognized the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration as a tribal veteran service organization that meets the criteria and standards to be accredited under the Tribal Representation Expansion Program, to assist veterans with benefit and pension claims. The Navajo Nation is the very first tribal nation to earn such recognition in the entire country. Zwierlein said the proposed benefits center would allow Navajo veterans to secure benefits without having to travel long distances at great expense.

“We shouldn’t view today’s announcement as an ultimate solution because we need to go beyond CBOC’s to fund and construct a facility or facilities on the Navajo Nation that all Native American veterans can use. We have a larger vision that will provide services for many more veterans than what the CBOC’s are able to,” said Zwierlein. “With regard to our new accreditation, since we became official on May 2, our 5 staff members who are federally accredited have processed 83 new veterans claims. That gives us an average of almost 1.5 new claims each day. These are all from Navajo veterans at this time, but we are starting to help non-Navajo veterans and their dependents with their federal claims.”

Acting U.S. Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs Melissa Bryant stated, “President Biden has insisted that our Veterans in the 21st century should not be forced to receive care in early 20th century buildings. The median age of VA’s hospitals is nearly 60 years old, and that’s why the President requested nearly \$20 billion in new VA infrastructure spending last year and it is why he has requested the largest ever investment in VA infrastructure in his FY23 budget. Whatever Congress decides to do with the AIR Commission - which was called for in the 2018 MISSION Act - we will continue to fight for the funding and modernization that our veterans deserve.”

On Tuesday, President Nez will have an opportunity to speak in support of Navajo veterans before Secretary McDonough to continue advocating for the benefits outreach center and hospital and other issues related to veterans services.

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