Begaye signs first Native Veterans Act into law

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WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – On Jan. 26, the 23rd Navajo Nation Council unanimously approved the Navajo Veterans Act, which will serve to establish the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration and Advisory Council.

"The Begaye-Nez Administration has committed the efforts of pertinent departments and resources to pushing this legislation forward and having it approved by the 23rd Navajo Nation Council," President Russell Begaye said. "By communicating directly with commanders at the agency and local level, hand-in-hand with our veterans, we were able to accomplish what no other administration before has been able to do."

Up until this point, the Office of the President and Vice President (OPVP) had set forth in presenting the Veterans Act through public outreach meetings held in communities across the Navajo Nation under the lead of OPVP Veteran's Liaison Jamescita Peshlakai.

The schedule of public hearings provided veterans the opportunity to comment and make critical suggestions toward creating a veterans administration that would be most beneficial to them.

"President Begaye and I promised the veterans that we would get the Veterans Act approved and we made good on our word," Vice President Nez said. "We committed to creating a Veteran's Liaison position within OPVP, which we did with Jamescita Peshlakai. We commend her for her coordination of the public outreach meetings. To see the passing of the Veteran's Act is a credit to both her efforts and the involvement of Navajo Veterans."

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Peshlakai said the passing of the legislation is truly significant for all indigenous people as they have been protectors of their traditional homelands for centuries.

"This Act provides our veterans the opportunity to mold services and benefits with our culture, our traditions, and our language for the purpose of taking care of our warriors who have returned from service."

Peshlakai added that the Act is inclusive of all returning warriors: men, women, disabled or challenged.

"It creates a family community that our suffering warriors can return to and be embraced in," she said.

The legislation establishes a Veterans Administration which serves to enhance outreach to Navajo veterans, as well as services and benefits. It also establishes a Veterans Advisory Council that encourages veteran participation in policy matters.

Edsel Pete, Department Manager for the Department of Navajo Veterans Affairs, said the Act provides an opportunity for the veterans to come to the table to help shape policy that affects their services and benefits.

"It's an opportunity to instill hope in veterans across the Navajo Nation. It's also an opportunity to create an interface of resources for veterans and services," he said. "We would like to thank the veterans for their involvement and support. The support of OPVP was crucial as well."

The Navajo Veterans Act establishes the Veterans Administration under the Office of the President and Vice President with an advisory council consisting of eleven members from each Navajo Agency.

Director of the Department of Behavioral Health Service, Theresa Galvin said beyond

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enhancing veterans services, the Veterans Administration will build toward meeting the critical demand of services for veterans which have gone unfulfilled until now.

"We are going to mark this monumental occasion with a celebratory signing because it's what our veterans deserve," President Begaye said. "This is just the beginning of our administration's commitment to fulfilling the objectives of our pillars. The top pillar being to serve our Navajo Veterans."

The Navajo Veterans Act, Legislation No. 0006-16, was sponsored by Council Delegate Jonathan Hale and co-sponsored by Delegate Edmund Yazzie. The Act passed unanimously with a vote of 20-0.