

## **Agreement furthers local healthcare for Navajo vets**

Written by Staff Reports

Friday, 27 January 2017 09:39

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WINDOW ROCK – The Department of Health and Human Services notified President Russell Begaye Jan. 24 that the Indian Health Service signed an amendment with the Department of Veterans Affairs to extend the national reimbursement agreement for direct health care services through June 20, 2019.

The extension of the reimbursement agreement will continue to allow the VA to financially compensate IHS for direct health care provided to American Indian and Alaska Native veterans that are eligible for and enrolled in VA's health care system.

"Our office will continue to advocate on behalf of our Navajo Veterans in facilitating the health care services that they need," Begaye said. "We participated in many Tribal Consultations and Tribal Advisory Committee meetings, letting the VA and DHHS know that the Navajo Nation has many rural areas. Because of which, our veterans need to utilize local IHS facilities as opposed to traveling extensively to regional VA hospitals."

Begaye said extending this agreement will greatly benefit Navajo Veterans.

"We appreciate the efforts of DHHS, IHS and the VA in continuing this partnership," he said.

The original MOU between IHS and the VA was signed on Oct. 1, 2010 with the intention to improve the health status of American Indian and Alaska Natives. The reimbursement agreement was signed on Dec. 5, 2012 and was set to end in December 2017.

By the end of fiscal year 2015, the VA had reimbursed over \$16.1 million for direct care services provided by IHS and Tribal Health Programs covering 5,000 eligible Veterans.

"The reimbursement agreement is working throughout Indian Country," said Vice President Jonathan Nez. "The MOU and agreement have helped veterans utilize IHS facilities without having to travel to major cities to receive care. In many cases, this has provided care to veterans who might have not sought care outside of their local IHS facilities. It's critical and has

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great impacts on the health of our veterans."

Principal Deputy Director of DHHS, Mary Smith said the goals of the MOU and agreement are to provide eligible American Indian and Alaska Native veterans with access to care closer to their homes.

In considering President Donald Trump's initial executive actions thus far, an Executive Order has been signed that allows the Secretary of Health and Human Services to waive or delay the implementation of any Affordable Care Act provisions that would impose a financial, state or regulatory burden on any individual.

If ACA is repealed it will further affect this reimbursement agreement that provides health care services to veterans.

Consequently, the repealing of the Indian Healthcare Improvement Act would have disastrous consequences for the IHS, as well as tribal and urban Indians who would lose critical third party revenue, legal authorities and life-saving programs.

The Navajo Nation is respectfully requesting that Congress retain the IHCIA as enacted within the ACA of 2010.