

President Begaye, Vice President Nez meet with U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs

Written by By Rick Abasta Press Officer Office of the President and Vice President
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WASHINGTON, D.C.—A veterans summit is in the works to bring together the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Navajo Veterans Affairs, congressional members, senators and most importantly, Navajo veterans seeking assistance.

The meeting is planned for autumn and will take place on the Navajo Nation, possibly during the Navajo Nation Fair.

That was the result of a July 8 meeting between Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye, Vice President Jonathan Nez and Stephanie Birdwell, Director of the Office of Tribal Government Relations for the VA.

The meeting took place at the VA headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Begaye focused on four key areas during the meeting: veterans housing, collaboration between Indian Health Services and the VA for veterans health care (in particular mental health), designation of the Navajo Nation as a regional veterans services center and passage of the Navajo Nation Veterans Act.

The Begaye-Nez administration platform of Navajo veterans, elders and youth, infrastructure and job creation will focus on the needs of veterans, he said.

“Veterans are number one on our platform because they are the protectors. They fought for our people and we don’t want to forget them,” Begaye said.

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The Southwest Region of the Office of Tribal Government Relations under the VA covers the Four Corners and works with 50 tribal governments.

The services provided by the three administrations of the VA – National Cemeteries, Veterans Benefits, and Veterans Health – are provided to veterans on tribal lands.

“(Office of Tribal Government Relations) is going on five years old, based here in D.C., but we have tribal relations government specialists located across the country,” Birdwell said.

She said they manage portfolios of relationships with tribes, with the primary focus and function of implementing the VA’s tribal consultation policy, engaging in activities that promote increased access to care and benefits, and promoting economic sustainability for veterans in Indian Country.

A reimbursement program between two federal agencies is an innovative agreement providing services for veterans.

Birdwell described the VA and IHS memorandum of understanding as “a book of possibilities,” and said the reimbursement agreement program is an important component.

The VA has reimbursed more than \$22 million over the past two years. About \$1 million per month has been reimbursed to IHS and tribal health care facilities.

“Some of the sites on the Navajo Nation are billing (for reimbursements) quite well and it’s exciting to see,” Birdwell said.

Begaye introduced Jamescita Peshlakai, the liaison for tribal veterans at the Navajo Nation Office of the President and Vice President. She joined by teleconference.

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“Jamescita is our point person on veterans affairs,” Begaye said. “She is highly educated, a former Arizona State Representative, a Gulf War veteran and she is politically connected.”

He said the Navajo Nation is going to join the five tribes that have tribal cemeteries on their nations that were funded by the VA National Cemetery Administration.

There are 131 national cemeteries across the country, five of which are located on tribal lands. The program came online in 1978 and \$264 million is available for grants, according to George Eisenbach, director of the Veterans Cemetery Grant Program.

“It’s a dynamic program that honors our warriors. South Dakota is working on their third tribal cemetery,” Eisenbach said.

He said the Navajo Nation is eligible. All that is needed is a tribal resolution and 10 percent in matching funds.

President Begaye said land was identified in the Chinle Agency years ago for a veterans’ cemetery.

Vice President Nez brought up the case of John Kinsel, a 94-year-old Navajo Code Talker that has been struggling with the VA to get benefits for injuries he suffered from World War II.

“Mr. Kinsel has been getting the run around from the Prescott VA and we would like for you to provide assistance,” Nez said.

Before concluding the meeting, Begaye said they would send an invitation to the VA, Congresswoman Ann Kirkpatrick and others for the Navajo Nation Veterans Summit during the tribal fair in Window Rock.