Written by Staff Reports
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WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and the Office of the President and Vice President Chief of Staff Paulson Chaco met with the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration on July 6, to continue developing short-term and long-term solutions to resolve a shortfall for the Veterans Trust Fund funding allocation for the upcoming FY2023, which will begin on Oct. 1.

The Navajo Nation Veterans Trust Fund was created in 1998 with an initial investment of $6 million to fund services for Navajo veterans and to reinvest a portion of the Navajo Nation's revenues into the trust fund to grow the principal. The principal has grown to over $200 million.

In 2017, the Navajo Nation Council approved the Navajo Nation Veterans Trust Fund Income Act, which amended Title 12 – Appropriations Act and redefined language related to the Veterans Trust Fund. The resolution was vetoed by former President Russell Begaye citing "unclear" language and misinterpretations.

The Navajo Nation Council eventually voted to override President Begaye's veto. In 2018, Resolution CJA-02-18 was signed into law and further complicated the funding distribution language in Title 12. From that point on, the definitions and language contained within Title 12 have not been clarified.

The problematic language was brought to light recently when the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration was requested to look into adopting a 50/50 formula to distribute funding for veterans benefits in the upcoming FY2023. The Navajo Nation Department of Justice found that the language supported in the 2017 override, through amendments made in CJA-02-18 and CJY-41-21 actually diverted more veterans funding back into the Veterans Trust Fund principal, rather than making it available for direct services and benefits for Navajo veterans. These calculations had been conducted prior to the appointment of the current Acting Controller.

On July 11, the Department of Justice and Office of the Controller reported to the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee that based on these facts, there would be a decrease in funding available for veterans' services and an increase in funds earmarked for veterans housing in the upcoming fiscal year if the matters are not addressed.

On July 7, the Office of the Controller issued a memorandum indicating a decrease for FY2023 of approximately $2.2 million for veterans' services and an increase of over $500,000 for veterans housing as compared to the amount available in FY2022. To resolve the shortfall for services, President Nez will request support to cover the shortfall using unallocated funding in the FY2023 Comprehensive Budget for benefits and services for Navajo veterans.

To resolve the issues in the long-term, the Navajo Veterans Administration is working with the Department of Justice to develop new legislation to amend Title 12, to clarify calculation methods.

"We are putting forth logical solutions to help our veterans, but it has to be done with support from our lawmakers. The Navajo Nation will be able to fund the veterans benefits for FY2023 as long as we have the support of the Council. As President, I support our veterans and we have done a lot to fix past policies that hold up progress," Nez said.

Nez said he would continue to help veterans by changing policies.

"As the current Acting Controller and Department of Justice look into the veterans' policies more and more, they find deficiencies and conflicting language that can only be resolved through legislative fixes," Nez said. "A couple of years ago, there were problems with the Navajo Veterans Housing Program that stopped the program completely, but we worked with delegates to make the appropriate amendments to the laws and now we are building quality homes for Navajo veterans. We are all five-fingered beings and we have to respect one another and work together to be a part of the solution."

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