

Arizona Department of Veterans' Service Advisory Commission
Chinle School District Administration Building
US Hwy 191 & Navajo Route 7, Chinle, AZ 86503
Saturday – March 12, 2011

Advisory Commissioners Present

Gary Fredricks, Chairman
Terrie Gent, Vice Chair
George Cushing
Jeffrey Olson
Lionel Sanchez
David Toliver, Sr.
Ken Yamanouchi

Absent

Phil Hanson
Lori Kiefer

Presenters

Dr. Paneer Selvam, Chief of Staff – Northern
Arizona Veterans Affairs Health Care
System (NAVAHCS)
LoRae HoMana Pawiki, American Indian Services
Coordinator – NAVAHCS

Arizona Department of Veterans' Services

Joey Strickland, Director
Homer Rodgers, Assistant Deputy Director
Mike Klier, Assistant Deputy Director
Fred Irwin, Veterans Service Division Trainer
John Dudas, Regional Manager - Veterans
Service Division
Katherine Harding, Executive Assistant to Director
Gabe Forsberg, Strategic Planner/Women Vets

Directors

Eugene "Geno" Talas, Director, Hopi Veterans
Services, The Hopi Tribe
David Nez, Director for the Navajo Department of
Veteran Affairs

Call to Order –The meeting was called to order at 10:00 a.m. by Chairman Gary Fredricks. After opening ceremonies, Chairman Fredricks introduced David Nez, Director for the Navajo Department of Veteran Affairs. Mr. Nez introduced a former Code Talker (Teddy Draper, Sr.), thanked the color guard for the opening ceremonies, and asked Ricky Gray from Kayenta to stand.

Chairman Fredricks then introduced Eugene “Geno” Talas. Director, Hopi Veterans Services, The Hopi Tribe. Mr. Talas introduced Phillip Quochytewa; a former Commissioner, Clark Tenakhongva, VA Outreach Office, Hotevilla; and Clifford Qotsaquahu, Hopi Veteran, Hopi Tribe.

Chairman Fredricks then introduced Director Joey Strickland who thanked the directors of both the Navajo and Hopi Nations and applauded their efforts to help veterans obtain their rightful benefits. Director Strickland then introduced his staff and the spouses of the Commissioners and staff in attendance. He then introduced LoRae HoMana Pawiki, American Indian Services for the Northern Arizona Veterans Health Care System (also called NAVAHCS).

Jasper Lake, Army, received a Purple Heart for valor in Operation Iraqi Freedom. He stood to be recognized. Other dignitaries recognized: Vice Commander Clarence Corning, Wanda and Arnette Arvizo of the Navajo Code Talkers, Joe Charles, Tom Gorman, and Ernie Yazzie,

Ms. Pawiki introduced Rod Sepulveda and Dr. Paneer Selvam from NAVAHCS. She also introduced Joe Cortez, Minority Veterans Coordinator at the VA Regional Office. Ms. Pawiki then turned over the meeting to Dr. Selvam, the Chief of Staff for NAVAHCS, to provide a detailed report on progress made by the VA to supply health care in Chinle.

Presentation by NAVAHCS Hospital

Dr. Paneer Selvam presented information about the Northern Arizona Veterans Health Care System's efforts to support Native American health care needs. The VA and Indian Health Services (IHS) are working together to allow them to share resources; their purpose is to help veterans in the Chinle area receive health care without having to drive to the NAVAHCS. An agreement between the two agencies allowing Veteran patients to be seen by VA health care providers in an Indian Health Service facility is currently under review. Northern Arizona VA Health Care System (NAVAHCS) has been to Chinle on two separate occasions to test this integrated health care approach. It is working well with both IHS and VA. The veterans are strong supporters. A third trial will be held later in March to see clients with the highest needs to be treated in the area.

This is the first model in an IHS setting in the United States. They are working to establish this as one model to provide care to Native American veterans living on reservations. Some of their challenges include:

- Finding staff able to live on the reservation (non-Navajo physicians need a place to live, children of the staff need to be able to attend school)
- Installing equipment that will support telehealth opportunities.

Navajo Department of Veteran Affairs Statement

David Nez thanked the Commissioners for coming to Chinle and read a prepared statement. One of the critical issues he cited was building a veteran cemetery on Navajo land. Chairman Fredricks asked that he supply the statement for the official files.

- Col. Strickland committed to helping with Stephanie Birdwell to see that the VA recognize all sovereign Indian government the same as it recognizes state departments of veterans affairs. The Navajo Nation needs to commit \$700,000 "seed money" to build a cemetery. The VA will spend \$7 - \$9 million to build the cemetery, but the Navajo Nation needs to commit seed money before the VA can authorize the expenditures. He also promised to provide more VBC services in Tuba City and for the Hopi.

Overview of the Commission

Chairman Fredricks – recapped activities of the AVSAC, explained purpose of the Commission, and asked the Commissioners to introduce themselves. Frances Totsoni, Marine veterans, indicated she was interested in serving as a Commissioner.

Questions from the Attendees

Attendees wishing to ask questions were asked to record their questions on comment card that were collected by Lionel Sanchez and Mike Klier. The questions are documented in bullet format below, followed by the response to that question:

- "Why isn't a house being built for me and my family. I've been waiting for 18 years."
- David Nez said there is no housing available at the federal level except for adaptive housing for disabled persons. There is no funding from the state at all. The Navajo Nation can provide materials for a 1,2, or 3 bedroom home; there is funding for 1-2 families per year under the Indigent Navajo program. Director Nez asked the veteran asking the question to go back to review the application.

- “I do PTSD presentations for vets in Flagstaff. Navajo Code Talkers do not have to write out their stories, but what about other veterans? This is a hardship for veterans who are not comfortable writing their stories (or unable to do so). The counselor was prohibited from writing up veterans’ experiences. This is important to establish Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).”
- Fred Irwin’s response: In the past, it was a requirement to have the veteran write up their stories. Now, the veterans are advised to set an appointment with a psychologist to have their experiences documented. If a veteran has a traumatic brain injury (TBI), a family member can write out your story. If the witnesses are prohibited from documenting their stories because of the security clearance of the person reviewing the claim, the injured veteran is encouraged to speak with the AZ Dept. of Veterans Services.
- A female Army veteran, came into the meeting late and had no comment card. She reported service-connected PTSD was exposed to military sexual trauma (MST). She never got the Bronze Star promised from actions in Desert Storm and had multiple complaints. She is rated at 100% service-connected disability (70% for MST and IBS).
- She was asked to speak with Fred Irwin at the end of the meeting.
- A veteran was frustrated because of all of the examinations that are required when the VA only rated service disability at 10%.
- Mike Klier said that he would need to look over the files so that the veteran’s situation could be properly evaluated.
- IHS and VA were both prepared to provide surgery to a veteran, but he was not able to get a call back from the IHS. He asked for advice on what to do.
- The veteran was referred to Rod Sepulveda with NAVAHCS.
- “Will there be a VA Hospital on the reservation? What is the fastest way to get a veteran to Prescott for care until that time?”
- Ms. Pawiki is going to continue pushing for the MOU between IHS and VA to serve vets in the area. There is a need to install communication lines for telehealth and staff housing needs to be worked out.
- “How does telehealth work?”
- Dr. Selvam said they don’t have the capability yet. When it is available, the patient will come into the Chinle clinic and a technician at the clinic can hook them up to equipment. The readings from the equipment can help a doctor who is at NAVAHCS evaluate the patient.
- One card was directed to Dr. S: Veteran vet clinic – “Who will pay for healthcare? IHS makes you apply for AHCCCS. This is an obstacle to receiving care.”
- Dr. Selvam asked the veteran to see him after the meeting.
- “What is the process for being seen at the trial clinic?”
- Ms. Pawiki reported that there were 24 appointments available and are limited at this time. Rod Sepulveda said that he is looking at the most critical needs and they will contact the individuals to set up times to be seen.

- “What is the latest on the cemetery in Chinle?”
- Phillip Quochytewa said that his question had been answered earlier in today’s meeting.
- “Most of our vets are over 60 years old. Are there any plans for elderly care and home repair to help them? Also, the question asked if there were plans to conduct a needs assessment.”
- Chairman Fredricks said that this is the express purpose of these regional meetings – to identify the needs of veterans statewide. Director Strickland said that he was going to spend as much time as possible working with the Navajo and Hopi to ensure that rural veterans’ needs are addressed. There are universal issues for rural vets (transportation is a big statewide issues).
- “My uncle served in WWII and they had to replace his knees and hip and his colon needed to be restructured. She can’t find any help for him to come to his home. His house is unsafe and he needs help badly. He applied for benefits 10-15 years ago.”
- She was asked to speak with Fred Irwin about her claim.
- Kee Chee and Kee Yazzie were asked to see Mike Klier after the meeting concluded to get answers to their questions.
- Why aren’t the reps from Utah, New Mexico and Colorado here?
- Chairman Fredricks spoke to the complexity of different agencies involved. It was his feeling that the attendees may not care which agency fixes the problem, but would like to know that the problems will be fixed. The Commission will consider this request for other state officials to be involved in future.
- Rural veterans have trouble because they do not have street addresses like in the city. There is a demand by some federal agencies to provide actual street addresses rather than the post office boxes for reservation residents.
 - Geno Talas recommended that the veterans talk to the Prescott Travel Pay section at the VA Hospital. You are able to get a statement from the nearest post office as to the location of the home from them. Mr. Talas is also able to issue such a statement as well.
 - Frances Totsoni wanted to inform the group that there was a housing needs assessment that may be helpful to establishing physical locations for homes on the Navajo Reservation. There was a survey so that the veterans’ homes would have a GPS location. Include that needs survey with the ADVS issues to establish what Navajo veterans need.
 - Wanda Arviso wanted to point out a recent program that dealt with rural addressing. McKinley County in New Mexico has been working with the VA on their needs for physical addresses. The VA in Arizona should review their progress.
- VA requirements to document PTSD requires reliving the veterans to re-experience the trauma. This is in direct violation of the Navajo way of life.
 - Cliff Qotsaquahu is a Hopi veteran and he spoke to the issue. The VA has incorporated native medicine from Hopi, Sioux and Navajo cultures as part of

the healing process.

- Stephanie Birdwell, Cherokee woman who is in charge of the VA's Native American Program., will be asked to provide insight on how traditional ceremonies are being used by Native American veterans.
- It is important to educate spouses about problems about PTSD, TBI, and other issues that affect families of returning military personnel.
 - David Nez said that he would look into bringing experts to the area to help families (Lionel gave the card to Dave).

Statements made during this part of the meeting (not in a question/answer format):

- A female veteran spoke in Navajo about PTSD and the need to start attending meetings, helping with color guard, and otherwise getting involved.
- Ricky Roy Jay – Desert Storm soldier. Reiterated that it is important that the veterans take care of themselves. His organization is focused on veterans helping veterans. There are issues that cannot be worked out by the Navajo Dept. Veterans Affairs, so he established his incorporated organization. He is looking for funding from county, state, and federal agencies. His organization is in Kayenta. We need to continue to working through HUD to make it a little easier for veterans to buy a home (a modern round Hogan).
 - Director Strickland said that the VA Home Loan doesn't work on the reservation because most of the people can't afford payments on a \$150,000 home. Veterans helping veterans is an excellent concept. Strickland says we depend too much on the government. Col. Offered assistance for any 501(c)(3) through the veterans donation Fund.
- Specialist Jasper Lake recently received the Purple Heart. Gailene Betsuie is his niece and she has helped him over the past year to document why he should be considered for the Congressional Medal of Honor (CMOH). Their family asked for support to ensure his paperwork receives the attention it deserves. There are only 6 Native Americans who have received the Medal of Honor.
- Paul Rock was recognized as a recipient of the Distinguished Service Medal.
- Wanda Arviso also recommended that the VA ask each of the chapters' veterans organization about issues and ask for feedback. This is the best way to find out what veterans on the reservation want.
- How safe is the pension and compensation in these troubled times?
 - Jeff Olson said that there was a legislative effort to reduce payments to veterans who are 30% or less in their disability. There has been staunch opposition and he believes that any efforts to decrease disability pay will be defeated.
- Polly Nez just started an auxiliary in Chinle. She is the widow of a Marine who had PTSD. She said that families also suffering from the results of combat. The Dept. of Navajo Veteran Affairs has been very helpful. There was a group of 14 organizations

to help a vet who was being hospitalized (refurbished his home completely). There are veterans returning now whose families also need help.

- Sarah Daly is the president of their organization. If her mother knew what to do, her father may still be here. She is a single parent and is now by herself because she wasn't able to understand PTSD.
- There was a recommendation of providing a local contact for a suicide hotline and that veterans try the traditional way instead of alcohol abuse. Someone needs to help those who do not have family to help them with ceremony as they leave for combat and upon their return. She feels veterans should be able to check into the hospital when in crisis. IHS needs to figure out something to do with those in crisis besides placing them in the ER.

David Nez made a parting statement and provided a token of appreciation to the Commission and the staff of the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services – a medal from the Navajo Nation.

Chairman Fredricks adjourned the meeting at approximately 1:05 p.m. The next meeting will be held April 14, 2011 in Phoenix.