

**MINUTES
of the
THIRD MEETING
of the
MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

**August 25, 2017
Thoreau Chapter House
Thoreau**

The third meeting of the Military and Veterans' Affairs Committee (MVAC) was called to order by Representative Rodolpho "Rudy" Martinez, co-chair, on August 25, 2017 at 9:01 a.m. at the Thoreau Chapter House in Thoreau. After the presentation of colors by the Tso Dzil Color Guard and the Pledge of Allegiance, Representative Martinez asked legislators and staff to introduce themselves.

Present

Rep. Rodolpho "Rudy" S. Martinez, Co-Chair
Sen. Bill Tallman, Co-Chair
Sen. Craig W. Brandt
Sen. William F. Burt
Rep. Harry Garcia
Sen. Michael Padilla

Absent

Rep. David E. Adkins
Rep. Bob Wooley

Advisory Members

Rep. Eliseo Lee Alcon
Rep. Jim Dines
Rep. George Dodge, Jr.
Sen. Richard C. Martinez
Sen. John Pinto
Rep. Jane E. Powdrell-Culbert
Rep. Dennis J. Roch
Rep. Debbie A. Rodella

Rep. Cathrynn N. Brown
Sen. Carlos R. Cisneros
Rep. Randal S. Crowder
Sen. William H. Payne
Rep. Debra M. Sariñana
Rep. Jim R. Trujillo

Staff

Jeret Fleetwood, Researcher, Legislative Council Service (LCS)
Peter Kovnat, Staff Attorney, LCS

Guests

The guest list is in the meeting file.

Handouts

Copies of all handouts and other written testimony are in the meeting file.

Friday, August 25

Welcome

Jonathan Nez, vice president, Navajo Nation, said that President Russell Begaye and the entire Navajo Nation welcome the committee to Thoreau and the Navajo Nation. Vice President Nez said that he advocates for veterans and is happy to see the committee in Thoreau for the first time. Vice President Nez spoke about Jackson Gibson's funeral, and the committee spent a moment in silent remembrance.

Vice President Nez said that focus is often on the U.S.-Navajo Treaty of 1868 and the Long Walk of the Navajo, but the story not often mentioned is the celebration of a return to the homeland. Next year marks 150 years since the treaty was signed, and the sacred trust between the two nations is evidenced by the large number of Navajos in the military.

As the effort to build a veterans' center in Thoreau continues, Vice President Nez said to press on to provide services and entitlements owed to veterans and to do it to honor Jackson Gibson, who always fought for veterans.

Edmund Yazzie, delegate, 23rd Navajo Nation Council, represents Thoreau and other neighboring chapters and said that, one way or another, the Thoreau Veteran Center will be built, and the \$300,000 from the state will not go unused. He then asked that the legislators meet one-on-one with audience members to directly address their concerns.

Lester Yazzie, executive assistant for Seth Damon, delegate, 23rd Navajo Nation Council, thanked the committee and all those present for coming.

The committee discussed the status of state funding for the Thoreau Veteran Center. Upon a motion and a second, and without opposition, the motion was passed to write letters to the Navajo Nation and to the governor of New Mexico to ask about the disposition of the money appropriated for the center, along with a request to not allow the money to revert before responding with an answer.

Building Healthy Military Communities Pilot Program

Susie Galea, state coordinator, Building Healthy Military Communities, spoke about the need for more resources and services for the state's veterans. She said that her organization is identifying gaps in services and trying to fill them. One of the big challenges, Ms. Galea noted, is the stigma attached to reaching out for help.

Going through a handout she provided, Ms. Galea highlighted her work to help provide tools for communication and access to services for veterans with MyVA Communities. She said that the community capacity inventory that MyVA creates is helpful for knowing what options exist for veterans.

Typically, the main shortfall veterans face is financial. Some states have military aid relief funds to address this. Those funds help veterans during emergencies and even during deployment, which can be costly for military families.

A legislator who is in the call center business said that building call centers near military bases and community colleges is smart because the trailing spouses make great employees. Also, with the impending federal budget dedicating money to a U.S./Mexico border wall, the legislator wondered about the United States Department of Defense (DOD) funding in the future and offered assistance for shortfalls.

Citing veterans' biggest need as transportation to medical providers, Ms. Galea said that the DOD is working on that and, in fact, that the DOD can provide funding for contracting private transportation and for food and lodging in this effort. She said that the three priorities of the state plan for New Mexico are access to finances, behavioral health and employment and that the federal government will fund the first five years of the plan and then expect the state to fund and follow whatever best practices emerge.

When asked how the committee can be of assistance to her efforts, Ms. Galea said that TRICARE is not a member of either the Interagency Behavioral Health Purchasing Collaborative or the New Mexico Health Information Exchange, but should be. Collaboration, she said, would allow for the dissemination of information that would enable the provision of better health care to veterans. She said a letter from the committee to the New Mexico TRICARE representative urging that it join both the collaborative and the exchange would be helpful.

Upon a motion, properly made and seconded and without opposition, the MVAC will send a letter to the New Mexico TRICARE representative urging its membership in the Interagency Behavioral Health Purchasing Collaborative and the New Mexico Health Information Exchange. A copy of the letter will go to the federal Civilian Health and Medical Program of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

Upon a second motion, properly made and seconded and without opposition, the MVAC agreed to send a letter to the United States Department of Health and Human Services requesting that it continue to allow New Mexico to keep the rural provider preference. A copy of the letter will go to the secretary of human services. That preference and the loan repayment program are critical to New Mexico's ability to recruit behavioral health providers to the state.

Veterans' Services Department (VSD)

Brigadier General Jack R. Fox, secretary, VSD, provided an update on the state veterans' home and the ongoing work on the state cemetery program. The expectation is that on November 6, 2017, the grand opening of the cemetery in Fort Stanton will happen, and the cemetery in Gallup will see the groundbreaking to start its two-year process soon. Secretary Fox mentioned that there was an honor guard training in Albuquerque, and it was very well attended.

A committee member asked about the process for the honor guard to receive ceremonial rifles and blank ammunition for free. An audience member who is an honor guard member said that there are requirements, including safe storage, but that the process is flawed, as evidenced by a bayonet and rifles sitting unused and dirty in Crownpoint. The honor guard said that it practices with broomsticks but could really use four rifles.

Secretary Fox is actively partnering with other executive departments and communities to solve problems that veterans face. He noted that despite the headlines nationally, the VSD has a great partnership with the VA in New Mexico. Finally, Secretary Fox said that a Purple Heart ceremony was scheduled for the next day at the Bataan Memorial Building in Santa Fe to recognize the sacrifices made by New Mexicans. A mention was made of a recent citizenship event held at the Museum of the American Military Family in Tijeras.

Dale Movius, state benefits and services director, VSD, discussed the veterans' benefits in the state, including the tax exemption/waiver; hunting/fishing licenses; museum and monuments pass; state parks pass, including four nights of camping; license plates; and various scholarships. A legislator said that while disabled veterans can get a free license to hunt elk, there is no place for them to hunt for free, and private landowners still charge to hunt on their land.

A discussion ensued about obstacles that hamper New Mexico's veterans when seeking assistance from the VA. Secretary Fox said that Mitchell Lawrence at the VSD deals with this issue daily and that New Mexico VA Medical Center Director Jack Welch is well aware of the obstacles and is seeking solutions. A committee member noted that Congress is considering cutting veterans' benefits once recipients start receiving social security benefits and hopes that this proposal does not get put in the federal veterans' bill working its way through Congress.

Also discussed were issues regarding transportation options to get to the VA hospital in Albuquerque. A request was made for a letter to the Legislative Finance Committee asking that it create a list of possible collaborators that could provide transportation to veterans.

Finally, the committee talked about the difficulties of getting driver's licenses and the fact that military identification documents are not being accepted by the Motor Vehicle Division (MVD) of the Taxation and Revenue Department. In response, the co-chair said that the MVD director would give a presentation at the next meeting.

Northwestern New Mexico Veterans' Issues

Collize Jones, American Legion Post 80, discussed the New Mexico Fisher House in Albuquerque. There are hundreds of Fisher Houses around the world. They are places where people visiting hospitalized veterans can stay. In Albuquerque, there is a delay with the Historic Preservation Division of the Cultural Affairs Department over the pitched-roof design. Jennifer Rice, American Legion Post 80, said that families are currently living in their cars, which is a problem in the summer heat of Albuquerque. Ms. Jones said that millions of dollars have been

pledged for the New Mexico Fisher House, and while she believes that the money pledged will not revert at some point, she does not know for sure.

The committee asked staff to draft a letter to the Historic Preservation Division requesting that it accept the pitched roof or somehow resolve this issue.

Public Comment

Former Governor Lloyd D. Tortalita of the Pueblo of Acoma discussed Vietnam, uranium, Agent Orange, diabetes, taxes and military burials.

Adjournment

There being no further business before the committee, the meeting adjourned at 2:35 p.m.