

**Testimony of President Jefferson Keel
National Congress of American Indians
Blue Dog Task Force on Rural America
Hearing on Rural Veterans
May 8, 2018**

Good afternoon. On behalf of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), I would like to thank Congressman O'Halleran and the other distinguished members of this Task Force for the opportunity to provide testimony today on issues impacting Native veterans. NCAI is the oldest, largest, and most representative organization supporting the interests of American Indian and Alaska Native tribal governments and communities. We are steadfastly dedicated to doing right by our Native veterans.

As a veteran myself, I am proud to say that Native Americans have a long history of distinguished service in this country. Per capita, American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) serve at a higher rate in the Armed Forces than any other group of Americans and have served in all of the Nation's wars since the Revolutionary War. In fact, Native veterans served in several wars before they were even recognized as American citizens. Despite this esteemed service, Native veterans have lower personal incomes, higher unemployment rates and are more likely to lack health insurance compared to other veterans.

In order to address this inequity, I would like to share with you some recommendations on how Congress can better assist Native veterans after their service to this country.

Veterans Housing
Tribal HUD-VASH

Homelessness is a concern for all veterans—especially Native veterans, and Congress created the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program to address this issue. The program has been a nationwide success because of its combination of rental assistance, case management, and clinical services for at-risk and homeless veterans. Unfortunately, this program is not fully available to Native veterans living on tribal lands.

NCAI and its members strongly support the Tribal HUD-VASH Demonstration Program, and we appreciate the work of Congressional appropriators who helped set up this demonstration program. We now call on Congress to permanently authorize this program so that Native veterans can have the same certainty and peace of mind afforded to all other veterans that are at-risk or homeless.

Currently, there are House and Senate companion versions of the Tribal HUD-VASH Act of 2017, which would authorize expansion of the HUD-VASH program to tribal lands. This bill has already passed committee in the Senate (S. 1333, Tester, D-MT) and enjoys bipartisan support. The House bill, H.R. 4359, introduced by Representatives Lujan and Ruiz, still awaits consideration by the House Financial Services Committee. NCAI urges consideration and passage of this legislation.

NCAI also urges Congress to restore funding for the Tribal HUD-VASH demonstration program to \$7 million in FY 2019. Without sufficient funding, it will be difficult for tribes to assist Native veterans to secure housing.

Native American Veteran Direct Loan Program

The Native American Veteran Direct Loan Program provides direct loans to Native American veterans living on trust lands. The loans are available to purchase, construct, or improve homes to be occupied as veteran residences, or to refinance a loan previously made under this program. However, the VA presently lacks adequate staff resources to conduct outreach and provide the required level of technical assistance to deploy the Native American Direct Loan program to qualified Native American veterans.

NCAI recommends that Congress provide authority for the VA to access a portion of the VA Guaranty Funding Fee so the Secretary can follow the practice of other federal direct loan programs that partner with and compensate third parties to provide homebuyer education, loan packaging, and other necessary technical assistance. This budget neutral solution will help Native American veterans fully access their VA benefits.

Veterans Health Issues

VA-IHS Memorandum of Understanding

The reauthorization of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act, which passed in 2010, requires the VA to reimburse the Indian Health Service, tribes, and tribal organizations for services provided to veterans. Some progress has been made in ensuring eligible veterans can access efficient, adequate health services in their own communities through their tribal facilities. However, the VA's model agreement limits reimbursement to certain types of care at IHS and does not cover non-Native veterans who would otherwise routinely receive services through IHS, such as non-Native women pregnant with Native children. As such, there is a continued need for Congressional oversight in this area, as the language "shall be reimbursed" should not permit the VA to impose limitations that were not included in the Indian Health Care Improvement Act.

Veterans Treatment Courts

NCAI is currently working to secure resources to enable tribal communities to establish Veteran Treatment Courts, an important tool in supporting our veterans. These courts focus on alternatives to incarceration by identifying underlying conditions like PTSD and substance dependence and then providing appropriate rehabilitation programming. This work is even more important given the impacts of the opioid epidemic in Indian Country.

We hope to work with Congress and members of this task force to ensure that opioids funding includes significant direct set-asides for tribes—including from the \$3 billion provided in the recent budget agreement for FY 2019. It will also be important for Congress to allow tribes the flexibility needed to use these resources for innovative models like Veterans Treatment Courts.

Veterans Nursing Homes on Tribal Land

Tribal lands are excluded from a law that provides a 65 percent construction reimbursement and per diem to veteran nursing care homes built on land owned by states and territories, as well as

land possessed by the United States. This exclusion is likely part of the reason that there are currently no veteran nursing homes located on tribal lands.

I would like to recognize Congressman O'Halleran for his work on this issue. His bipartisan bill, H.R. 2716, the Nursing Home Care for Native American Veterans Act, would encourage construction of veteran nursing care homes on tribal lands. Additionally, the bill would require the VA to compensate tribes for the care they provide in those homes.

Burial Issues

Currently, national and state veterans' cemeteries allow immediate family members to receive memorial headstones alongside their loved ones. However, the benefit only extends to family members who passed away after 2006 and does not extend to family members of veterans buried in tribal veterans' cemeteries. I am encouraged that bills (S. 2248, Tester, D-MT and H.R. 3657, Poliquin, R-ME) have passed each chamber to address this issues, and hopefully we will see legislation enacted that extend those benefits to the spouses and children of veterans buried in tribal cemeteries.

Alaska Native Vietnam Veterans

Approximately 2,800 Alaska Natives who were out of the country serving during the Vietnam War missed an opportunity to apply for a land allotment under the 1906 Alaska Native Allotment Act. The Alaska delegation has introduced bills in both the House (H.R. 1876) and Senate (S. 785) that would amend the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act to provide equitable treatment to Alaska Native Vietnam Veterans in their acquisition of land under the Native Allotment Act of 1906. NCAI urges this Task Force to support passage of legislation that would provide long-overdue justice for Native Alaskan Vietnam Veterans.

NMAI's National Native American Veterans' Memorial Design Competition

Finally, I wanted to provide an update on the National Native American Veterans' Memorial, a collaborative effort by NCAI and the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) to honor Native Veterans. The memorial was authorized by the Native American Veterans' Memorial Establishment Act of 1994 and advanced by the Native American Veterans' Memorial Amendments Act of 2013.

At the beginning of this year, NMAI announced the five finalists for the design competition, and the finalists just submitted their final designs last week. We are excited that the winner is scheduled to be announced on July 4th and the dedication of the memorial is planned for Veterans Day 2020. This recognition of the distinguished military service of American Indians and Alaska Natives is a long time coming, and we are grateful for the support over the years.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon, and we appreciate the Task Force's commitment to the important goals of improving the lives of our Native veterans. NCAI looks forward to working with this Task Force to ensure that the recommendations from the hearing today take into account the unique needs of Native veterans.