

April 10, 2025

The Honorable Doug Collins
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420
via email:

**RE: Serving Native American Veterans in the VA's Implementation of Administration
Priorities**

Dear Secretary Collins:

On behalf of the undersigned organizations serving Tribal Nations and Tribal citizens and communities, including Native American veterans and their communities, we write to congratulate you on your appointment as Secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and to discuss the VA's implementation of the Administration's policy priorities. We request a meeting with you at your earliest convenience to explore how we can collaborate to ensure that the needs and concerns of Native American veterans are fully addressed, while upholding the sovereign status of Tribal Nations and fulfilling the U.S. government's trust and treaty obligations. As an initial step, we ask that the VA immediately un-pause and expand programs aimed at improving healthcare access and services for Native American veterans.

Additionally, we write in support of the priorities outlined by members of the VA Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs in their letter dated March 27, 2025, and the letter dated April 4, 2025, sent by the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), the National Indian Health Board (NIHB), the Self-Governance Communications and Education Tribal Consortium (SGCE), and the National Council of Urban Indian Health (NCUIH). This includes reaffirming the VA's commitment to robust government-to-government consultation with Tribal Nations, expanding healthcare access, and ensuring that Native American veterans' unique needs are met in a culturally appropriate manner.

Native American Veterans and Tribal Programs are Unique. Per capita, Native people serve at a higher rate in the Armed Forces than any other group of Americans, and they have served in all the nation's wars since the Revolutionary War. Native American veterans have even served in several wars before they were recognized as U.S. citizens and before they had the right to vote at the polls. As Tribal citizens, Native American veterans access Tribal programs and funding provided on the basis of their unique political status, and these programs are legally required by trust and treaty obligations and the many statutes that implement these obligations, such as the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act. Further, many of these programs provide essential direct services to the rural communities who rely on them, including services that non-Native American veterans access through Tribal programs working in partnership with the VA. Tribal programs are not like other federal programs, and Native American veterans are owed a dual duty of care both as Tribal citizens and as U.S. Armed Services veterans.

Legal Status of Tribal Nations. Tribal Nations are and always have been inherently sovereign governments that have strong political relationships with our Tribal citizens and community members. We govern and police our lands, and we provide governmental services aimed at keeping our communities safe and healthy. Tribal Nations also have political, government-to-government relationships with the United States, and we prepaid with our lands and resources for trust and treaty obligations that are carried out by the federal government in part through a series of federal statutory mandates. The U.S. Constitution singles out Tribal Nations and Native people as unique, and the U.S. Supreme Court has time and again affirmed the principle that United States actions that deliver on trust and treaty obligations to Tribal Nations, Tribal citizens, or Tribal communities do not run afoul of the U.S. Constitution's equal protection requirements.

Collaboration with Native American Veterans Organizations to Advance Shared Priorities. As the VA works to advance the Administration's priorities and strengthen its relationship with Native American veterans and their families, we offer the following points for consideration.

Increasing Opportunities for Native American Veterans in Policy Development. Native American veterans have unique needs and experiences that require tailored services and support. We look forward to working with you and Congressional partners to ensure that policies impacting Native American veterans are informed by their experiences and needs. We strongly urge the VA to incorporate specific provisions into its strategies that address these unique challenges, including access to healthcare, housing, and employment, particularly in rural and Tribal areas.

Improving Healthcare Access for Native American Veterans. Native American veterans face significant barriers to healthcare access, including limited availability of VA facilities in rural or Tribal areas. We urge the VA to expand on Tribal reimbursement and sharing agreements, and increase telehealth services and mobile health clinics to ensure that Native American veterans receive timely and adequate healthcare. Additionally, we call for increased funding for the Indian Health Service (IHS) to ensure that Native American veterans can access high-quality care through both IHS and VA systems.

Strengthening Veterans' Education and Employment Opportunities. Native American veterans face unique challenges in accessing higher education and employment opportunities. We urge the VA to work closely with Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) to ensure that Native American veterans have access to educational benefits, job training programs, and employment resources that meet their needs. Further, we support policies that help Native American veterans transition into civilian life with the skills and resources needed for successful careers.

Increasing Housing Options for Native American Veterans. As a general matter, housing infrastructure in Indian Country continues to lag behind the rest of the United States, with over 70% of existing housing stock in Tribal communities in need of upgrades and repairs, many of them extensive. Despite the service they provide to our country, homelessness and housing insecurity remains a major concern for our Native American veterans, with some data indicating that Native veterans made up 19% of all homeless veterans, making the Native veteran homeless rate almost 10 times their representation in

the general population. The VA has authority and resources to address this issue. For instance, according to a 2022 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, despite the VA's authority under the Native American Direct Loan (NADL) program, the VA has originated loans for veterans to less than 1% of the estimated eligible veteran population. The VA must work with Tribal Nations to do better at addressing homelessness and under-housing among Native American veterans.

Supporting Tribal Veterans Programs. Tribal veterans' programs are essential for addressing the specific needs of Native American veterans within Tribal communities. These programs provide critical services, including mental health support, housing assistance, and employment resources. We request that the VA increase its support for Tribal veterans' programs to ensure they are fully funded and equipped to serve Native American veterans. Furthermore, we call on the VA to engage in regular, meaningful consultation with Tribal leaders to ensure these programs align with Tribal veterans' needs and priorities.

Impact of Recent Federal Actions on Native American Veterans. Some recent federal actions tied to implementing the Administration's priorities have inadvertently harmed Native American veterans and their communities. We are concerned that the VA has not adequately accounted for the unique legal status and needs of and the legal obligations owed to Native American veterans. For instance, efforts to reduce the federal workforce or alter funding structures may negatively impact veterans' services in Indian Country. Policy implementation must not undermine the trust and treaty obligations owed to Native American veterans and their communities.

Requests for Immediate Action. As the Administration moves forward with its policy priorities, we make the following requests.

1. **Consultation and Collaboration.** Engage with Tribal Nations and Tribal organizations serving Native American veterans to better understand how federal actions, including those related to veterans' services, may affect Native American veterans and their communities. This type of consultation is consistent with the United States' duty to engage with Tribal Nations and to uphold its trust and treaty obligations. Through this consultation, we can help the Administration identify Tribal programs that fit into the Administration's Executive Order carve outs, including where within the federal government direct and essential services are being provided to Indian Country and how to implement the Administration's policy priorities without affecting ongoing legal requirements to Indian Country.
2. **Affirmation of Trust and Treaty Obligations and Political Status.** Explicitly affirm that programs and funding delivered to Native American veterans are carried out in recognition of their unique political status and are part of the United States' trust and treaty obligations.
3. **Exemption from Funding Cuts.** Exempt from any reductions in funding or services all veterans' programs and funding delivered to Native American veterans, including through Tribal health organizations and the IHS.
4. **Workforce Protection.** Exempt from any workforce reductions or hiring freezes all federal employees serving in Tribal veterans' programs or whose roles directly assist in the delivery of services to Native American veterans.

5. **Reinstate the Veterans Administration Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs (VA-ACTIA).** Lift the administrative “pause” on the VA-ACTIA immediately, and allow the VA Office of Tribal Government Relations to continue the work of this statutorily mandated Tribal Advisory Committee.

Conclusion. The needs of Native American veterans are unique and require tailored responses to ensure their access to healthcare, education, employment, and other critical services. As the VA implements the Administration’s priorities, we urge you to protect Native American veterans’ rights and interests and uphold the federal government’s trust and treaty obligations.

Thank you for your leadership on these important issues. We look forward to collaborating with you and your team to advance these critical goals and ensure that Native American veterans receive the support they deserve.

Sincerely,

American Indian Higher Education Consortium
California Tribal Chairpersons' Association
Great Plains Tribal Chairmen's Association
Inter Tribal Association of Arizona
National American Indian Court Judges Association
National American Indian Housing Council
National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development
National Indian Child Welfare Association
National Indian Education Association
National Indian Health Board
Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board
Self-Governance Communication & Education Tribal Consortium
United South & Eastern Tribes Sovereign Protection Fund