

March 27, 2025

Douglas A. Collin
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Subject: Urgent Request for Clarity and Consultation Regarding VA Tribal Advisory Committee (TAC) Pause

Dear Secretary Collins,

As the Chairwoman of the VA Tribal Advisory Committee (TAC) and in collaboration with Urban Indian Organizations (UIOs), Tribal Governments and Tribal Organizations, we are reaching out with deep concern regarding the recent pause of the VA TAC. While we recognize the complexities of administrative decisions, this pause raises significant questions about the Department of Veterans Affairs' commitment to Tribal veterans.

AUTHORITY: The Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs (Committee) is a statutory committee established as required by Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-315) and 38 U.S.C. §547. The Committee operates in accordance with the provisions of the Federal Advisory Committee Act, as amended, 5 U.S.C. Appendix 2.

We seek to better understand the rationale behind this decision and ensure that appropriate consultation has occurred before any actions that could affect Tribal veterans and their access to services. We respectfully urge the VA to consider the following concerns:

1. Ensuring Legal and Policy Adherence

- The VA is bound by legal obligations, including the trust responsibility to Tribal Nations and federal advisory committee requirements. If this pause disrupts the essential function of Tribal consultation, it must be reevaluated to ensure alignment with federal law.

2. Importance of Tribal Consultation in Decision-Making

- We request clarification on whether such consultation took place before the VA TAC pause. If not, we strongly urge a review of this decision to uphold the federal government's commitments to Tribal sovereignty and self-determination.

3. Impact on Tribal Veterans and Health Systems

- The VA TAC plays a critical role in advising on policies that affect Native veterans. A pause in its operations raises concerns about the continuity of efforts to address health disparities, benefits access, and systemic challenges within the VA for AI/AN veterans.
- Delays in policy review and engagement risk long-term impacts on funding, program effectiveness, and trust between the VA and Tribal Nations.

4. Request for Transparency and Reinstatement of the TAC

- The VA's long standing partnership with Tribes and UIOs relies on open communication and collaboration. We urge the VA to publicly share the rationale for this pause, its expected impact, and how it plans to ensure continued consultation with Tribes and Urban Native communities.
- We request that the VA reaffirm its commitment to the continuation of the VA TAC or provide alternative mechanisms for Tribal leaders and Urban Indian Organizations to engage meaningfully in policy discussions that impact our communities.

Requested Actions:

To uphold transparency, accountability, and adherence to Tribal consultation obligations, we respectfully request the VA to:

1. Provide an immediate response clarifying the authority and reasoning for the VA TAC pause.
2. Have a meeting with the TAC membership and Tribal Leadership
3. Ensure that all Tribal consultation obligations under the VA's Consultation Policy are upheld, and outline a plan for engagement moving forward.
4. Commit to transparency by publicly sharing details on the pause's expected impact on Tribal veterans and related programs.
5. Engage Congressional oversight committees to ensure that this pause does not lead to negative consequences for Tribal health and veterans' services.

We strongly believe that the VA's role in serving Native veterans is too important to be affected by sudden administrative changes without input from Tribal leaders and UIOs. We remain committed to working collaboratively with the VA to ensure that Native veterans receive the representation and services they deserve.

We look forward to your timely response and to continuing our partnership in the best interest of Tribal Nations and Native veterans.

Sincerely,

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Sonya M. Tetnowski, Makah Tribal Member
U.S. Army Veteran
Chair of the VA TAC
CEO of the Indian Health Center of Santa Clara Valley

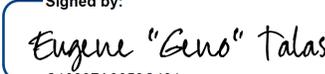
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Chief Bill Smith
Valdez Native Tribe Enrolled Member
U.S. Army Veteran

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Eugene "Geno" Talas,
Hopi Tribe Enrolled Member
U.S. Air Force Veteran

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Adam Archuleta, MPH
Hopi/Tewa Tribe Enrolled Member
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Ivan Sam
Navajo Tribe Enrolled Member
U.S. Navy Veteran

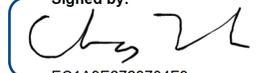
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Kevin D. Meeks
Chickasaw Nation Enrolled Member
U.S. Navy Veteran

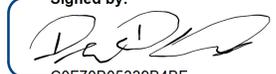
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Chauncey L Parker
Chippewa-Cree Enrolled Member
U.S. Army Veteran

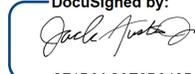
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Jack Austin Jr.
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U.S. Air Force Veteran