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Health, Education, and Human Services Committee approves corrective action plan for Department of Veterans Affairs – Fort Defiance Agency

WINDOW ROCK – The Health, Education, and Human Services Committee considered Legislation No. 0127-15 on Wednesday, which seeks to accept an audit report and approve a corrective action plan for the Department of Navajo Veterans Affairs – Fort Defiance Agency.

According to the audit report submitted by the Navajo Nation Office of the Auditor General in Jan. 2015, there were four findings within the financial assistance program that require immediate remedial action, which aided the DNVA in developing a CAP for the Fort Defiance Agency.

The findings in the report are as follows: ineligible recipients received approximately \$18,000 in financial assistance; the veterans' registry had issues with verification of chapter enrollment, 69% of financial assistance requests were processed late and 19% of the assistance checks were not released in a timely manner, and nearly \$15,000 in fees for traditional healing ceremonies were not reimbursed.

Legislation sponsor HEHSC chair Council Delegate Jonathan Hale (Oak Springs, St. Michaels) said the audit findings indicate that much of the discrepancies were due to systematic problems that could be solved through the application of the CAP in all DNVA offices on the Navajo Nation.

"I commend you all for reevaluating your system, and this needs to apply to the all other DNVA agencies. It comes down to accountability and identifying the deficiencies, as well as continuing to observe how the systematic changes can positively apply to other DNVA offices," said Delegate Hale.

DNVA program manager Edsel Pete, stated that portions of the CAP have already been implemented, including improvements to the registration process, verifying information for eligible recipients, establishing timelines for processing and distributing financial assistance checks, and collaborating with the Department of Information Technology to improve the veterans database system.

"We want to move forward. It is easy to make excuses, but one of the things we are discussing is how can we improve the DNVA. [The HEHSC members] comments and recommendations helps us reinforce our goals and ensure accountability at all levels," said Pete. "We need to do better for our veterans and increase efficiency."

EHSC member Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty (Beclabito, Cove, Gadi'i'áhi/To'Koi, Red Valley, Tooh Haltsooi, Toadlena/Two Grey Hills, Tsé alnáoz't'l'í) raised a concern regarding the initial registration process and how financial assistance criteria is being determined by office assistants.

“We have given so much authority and power to these individuals, which is not in their job description, to have the power to decide who should get the financial assistance. You really need to reel in what kind of authority is given to these individuals. They are critical to maintaining the flow of the office, but deciding who gets the assistance should be made at the managerial level,” said Delegate Crotty.

In agreement, Pete said his department would review and revise the duties and responsibilities of office positions. He added that his staff would also increase communication with the veterans to ensure they submit all their required documents and receive their assistance checks as soon as possible.

EHSC members voted 3-0 to approve Legislation No. 0127-15. The bill now goes to the Budget and Finance Committee who have final authority on the legislation.

The bill requires the DNVA to provide a report to the Office of the Auditor General regarding the program's implementation of the CAP's six months following the BFC's approval.

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