



The 24TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL
Office of the Speaker

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Appointment Questioned by Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay, Jr., Non-Navajo to represent Navajo Veterans Nationally

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PHOTO: Members of the 24th Navajo Nation Council join Chief of Staff Sherylene Yazzie in special flag raising ceremony dedicated to Navajo Code Talkers in Quantico, Va.

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay, Jr. questions the nomination of Navajo Veterans Administration (NNVA) executive director, James Zwierlein, to the Committee for Tribal and Indian Affairs at the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

In June, the VA requested the Navajo Nation to nominate qualified candidates to be considered for appointment as a member of the Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs (ACTIA).

Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez immediately nominated NNVA director James Zwierlein to the ACTIA, who is not an enrolled member of the Navajo Nation.

“It is utterly disappointing that President Jonathan Nez nominated a non-Navajo to represent the concerns of our Navajo veterans for this important committee at the Department of Veterans Affairs,” said Delegate Kee Allen Begay, Jr. (Tachee/Blue Gap, Many Farms, Nazlini, Tselani/Cottonwood, Low Mountain) “It is obvious that President Jonathan Nez and the Navajo Nation Washington Office lack communication with the Legislative Branch. It is concerning that James Zwierlein tries to lead the Navajo Veterans Administration with no respect for local veteran organizations.”

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An honorably discharged E-5 Sergeant in the United States Army, Council Delegate Begay earned the Army Service Ribbon, the National Defense Medal, an Overseas Service Ribbon, the Army Achievement Medal, the Marksmanship Badge, the Good Conduct Medal, and the Non-Commissioned Officer Professional Development Ribbon.

“Many agency veterans organizations have passed resolutions with a vote of no confidence in the leadership of James Zwierlein,” said Delegate Kee Allen Begay, Jr. “Since July, I submitted a resume and my credentials to the Navajo Nation Washington Office for this position but there has been no response, no consultation. That is unacceptable for me and disrespectful to our Navajo veterans.”

In October, a letter was sent to the VA Director of Tribal Government Relations, Stephanie Birdwell, questioning the appointment process and the criteria utilized for the evaluation and selection of Mr. Zwierlein.

No formal response was provided by Ms. Santee Lewis, Navajo Nation Washington Office executive director, or the Department of Veterans Affairs.

“Delegate Begay has the experience and proven record to effectively advocate for our Native American veterans across Indian Country,” said Speaker Seth Damon (Bááhaalí, Chichiltah, Manuelito, Red Rock, Rock Springs, Tséyatoh). “As an honorably discharged veteran, he understands local veterans issues and is a champion for our Gold Star and Blue Star families. He would have been an outstanding representative in this distinguished role and we know he will continue to hold the Navajo Veterans Administration accountable.”

In August, the Naabik’iyáti’ Committee passed Resoltuion No. NABIAU-25-21 sponsored by Council Delegate Begay that reaffirms previous resolutions requesting the United States Congress and the Biden Administration to establish direct veterans services on the Navajo Nation.

“It is important for the Navajo people to know that a non-Navajo was appointed by the federal government at the urging of the Navajo Nation Washington Office to represent our Native American veterans nationally,” said Delegate Kee Allen Begay, Jr. “The Council is always here with our Navajo veterans and their families. This appointment of James Zwierlein is another example of how the Department of Veterans Affairs has failed us.”

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