

**U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
Legislative Hearing on Pending Legislation  
Written Testimony of the National Congress of American Indians  
May 22, 2019**

**Introduction**

On behalf of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), thank you for holding this hearing on legislation to support veterans. Founded in 1944, NCAI is the oldest and largest representative organization serving the broad interests of tribal nations and communities. Tribal leaders created NCAI in 1944 in response to termination and assimilation policies that threatened the existence of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) tribal nations. Since then, NCAI has fought to preserve the treaty and sovereign rights of tribal nations, advance the government-to-government relationship, and remove historic structural impediments to tribal self-determination.

NCAI is grateful for the committee's consideration of legislation intended to better fulfill the federal government's commitment to providing for the wellbeing of Native veterans when they return home.

**S. 524, the Department of Veterans Affairs Tribal Advisory Committee Act of 2019**

Tribal nations have always held tribal citizens that serve in all branches of the U.S. Armed Forces in the highest esteem. Per capita, American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) serve at a higher rate than any other group of Americans and have served in all of the Nation's wars since the Revolutionary War. Despite this long history of service, too often Native veterans have difficulty accessing the benefits they earned through their military service.

S. 524, the Department of Veterans Affairs Tribal Advisory Committee Act of 2019, would begin to help address the challenges faced by Native veterans. This legislation establishes the Veterans Affairs Tribal Advisory Committee (VATAC), which would provide vital opportunities for collaboration, communication, and coordination between the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and tribal nations. Specifically, the VATAC would advise the Secretary on how to improve programs and services for Native veterans, identify timely issues related to Department programs, propose solutions to identified issues, provide a forum for discussion, and help facilitate getting useful feedback from across Indian Country.

Building a strong relationship between the VA and tribal nations will increase awareness and understanding across the VA of the unique issues affecting Native veterans in tribal communities. This awareness, paired with more direct interaction with tribal leaders who regularly hear from Native veteran constituents will ultimately produce faster solutions and better services for AI/ANs that have served this country.

Accordingly, NCAI supports the immediate passage of S. 524.

**S. 785 and S. 980**

NCAI would also like to provide testimony on two other bills: S. 785, the Commander John

Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019; and S. 980, the Homeless Veterans Prevention Act of 2019. Although not tribal-specific, each of these bills includes provisions that would help address significant issues impacting Native veterans across the United States.

American Indians and Alaska Natives experience high rates of depression and psychological distress, which contributes to Native people having the highest suicide rate of any group in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Suicide continues to be a major concern for AI/AN veterans. S. 785 includes provisions that could support mental health wellness services to Native veterans who face barriers in accessing mental health care services directly from the VA. Building capacity and increasing accessible mental health care services for Native veterans is a positive step towards ending this epidemic and ensuring a healthy future for tribal citizens that served this country. NCAI would like to work with the Committee to ensure that the provisions of this legislation will significantly reduce suicide rates among Native veterans.

Additionally, when Native veterans return home from their military service, it is all too common that they face barriers to reestablishing themselves in civilian life, especially when it comes to obtaining safe and affordable housing. S. 980 would help eliminate those barriers by expanding access to legal assistance for housing and other purposes. Creating partnerships to increase access to legal services for Native veterans who are homeless or at risk of being homeless will help ensure that Native veterans can find housing and utilize other benefits provided through the VA.

## **Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this legislation, and we greatly appreciate the work of this Committee to address the many challenges and barriers faced by Native veterans. We look forward to working with this Committee to pass S. 524 and advance other federal policies that support those who have served our Country.

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<sup>1</sup> Leavitt RA, Ertl A, Sheats K, Petrosky E, Ivey-Stephenson A, Fowler KA. Suicides Among American Indian/Alaska Natives — National Violent Death Reporting System, 18 States, 2003–2014. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2018; 67:237–242. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6708a1>