



May 20, 2026

The Honorable Doug Collins
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Re: Importance of the US Department of Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs

Secretary Collins,

On behalf of the undersigned national organizations collectively serving all 575+ sovereign federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Tribal Nations and all 41 Urban Indian Organizations (UIOs), we write to express serious concern regarding the continued inactivity of the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs (VA TAC) as a result of unresolved membership appointments.

Historically, the VA TAC has served as a cohesive, collaborative body, bringing together Tribal leaders, subject matter experts, and advocates to recommend practical solutions to the VA on matters directly impacting AI/AN veterans. Through this work, the VA TAC plays a critical role in better ensuring the VA fulfills its federal trust and treaty obligations and remains responsive to the unique needs of AI/AN veterans. We are deeply concerned that, despite the VA's May 2025 solicitation of nominations for nine open positions on the VA TAC, the VA has yet to finalize any appointments. We understand that VA leadership placed last year's nominations under internal "review." This review has now stretched on. As a result, no new appointments have moved forward. Consequently, the terms of all VA TAC members have expired—even those who sought reappointment. The TAC is now unable to conduct its work. It cannot effectively advise the Secretary on matters affecting AI/AN veterans. This outcome undermines Congress' intent and jeopardizes the VA's ability to meet its statutory responsibilities.

As noted in previous correspondence,¹ Congress established the VA TAC through the Isakson and Roe Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (Act).² Congress introduced the legislation with Republican co-sponsors in both chambers, including original Senate co-sponsors Dan Sullivan (R-AK) and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), and House co-sponsors Tom Cole (R-OK), Ken Calvert (R-CA), and David Joyce (R-OH), and was signed into law by President Trump on January 5, 2021.

The Act requires the Committee to advise the Secretary on ensuring that Native American veterans “are not denied the full benefit of their status as both Native Americans and veterans.”³ The Act further mandates that the VA TAC meet in person with the Secretary, or the Secretary's designee, no fewer than two times per year. Without appointed members, the VA cannot meet these statutory requirements.

The stakes are considerable. AI/AN service members have served in every major armed conflict at rates higher than any other ethnic group and continue to do so today. More than 145,000 AI/AN veterans rely on a VA system that understands both their service and the federal government’s unique government-to-government relationship with Tribal Nations.⁴ The advisory role of the VA TAC is essential to ensuring VA policies and programs reflect this responsibility.

We commend your recent engagement with Tribal leaders, including the March 30, 2026, roundtable in Oklahoma City, OK. During that discussion, you shared your commitment to Native veterans and asked how the VA can better reach those who "don't feel welcome." The VA TAC is the statutory body Congress and the Trump Administration created to address exactly that question. Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter, and we look forward to your response and continued engagement.

Accordingly, we respectfully request that the VA lift the current review period and proceed with appointing members to the VA TAC from the slate of nominations solicited last year. The VA must reconstitute the VA TAC and permit it to resume its important and legally required work without further delay.

Respectfully,

National Indian Health Board
National Congress of American Indians

¹ Joint Tribal Organization Letter to Secretary Collins. (2025, April 4). RE: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee on Tribal Affairs – Pause. Retrieved on May 8, 2026. See: <https://www.nihb.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/2025-04-04-Joint-Tribal-Org-Ltr-to-Sec.-Collins-re.-VA-Tribal-Adv-Cmtee-Pause-Final.pdf>

² PL 116-315; 38 USC § 547

³ 38 USC § 547(f)(7)

⁴ VA Veteran Population Projection Model, 2018: https://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran_population.asp.

Tribal Self-Governance
National Council of Urban Indian Health

CC: Stephanie Birdwell, VA Office of Tribal Government Relations, Executive Director