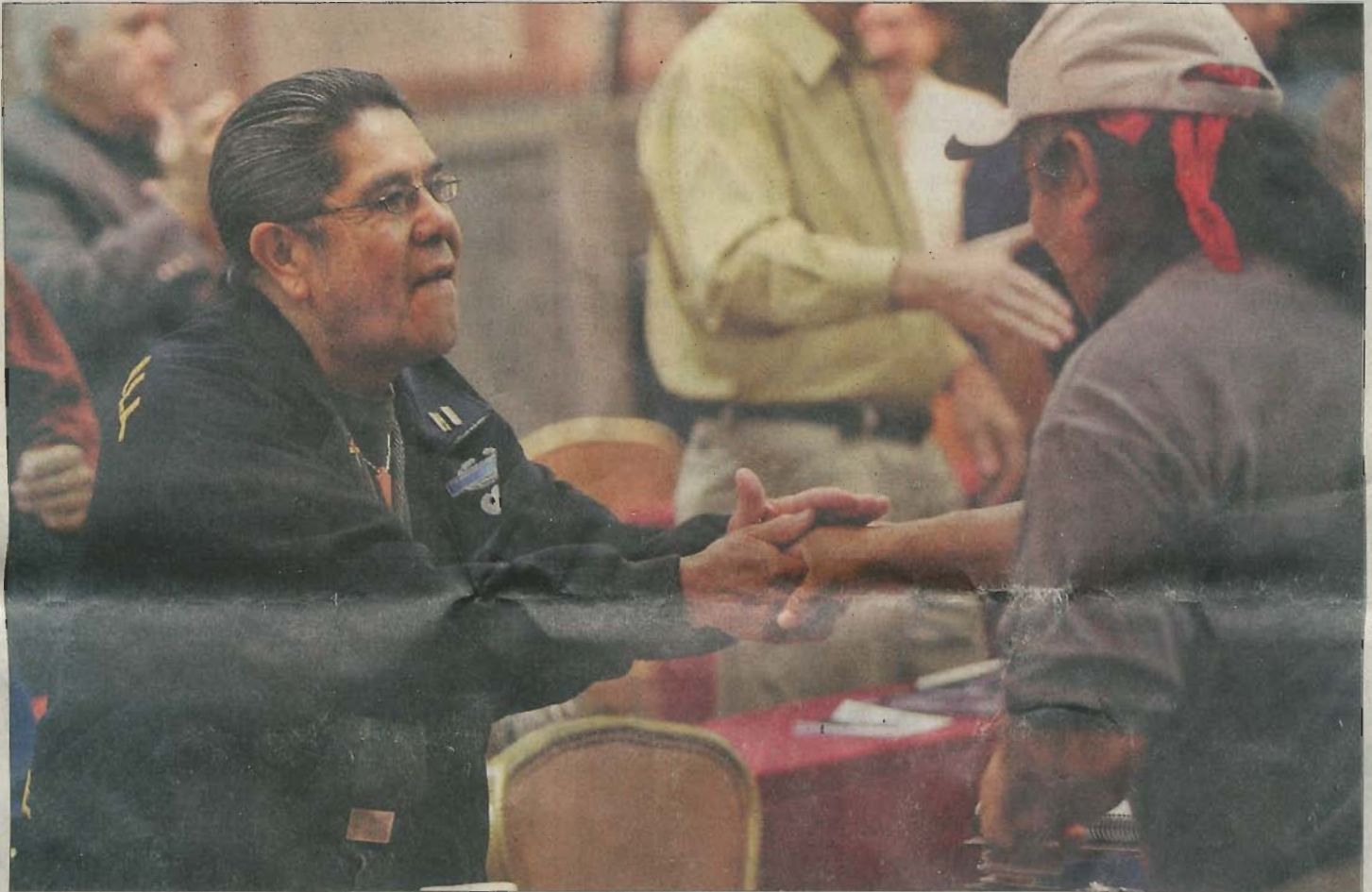


*American Indian service officers work to 'empower within'*

# GIVING BACK TO VETERANS



Photos by Ramsay de Give/The New Mexican

**Michael Vigil, a member of Tesuque Pueblo, shakes hands with another U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs service officer Thursday during graduation ceremonies in Albuquerque. Vigil is part of the first graduating class of American Indian service officers who received certification to help veterans file claims with the VA.**

**By Natalie Storey**  
The New Mexican

**I**t took Tesuque Pueblo member Michael Vigil more than 30 years to get the benefits he was entitled to as a veteran of the Vietnam War.

Vigil suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, a bad back and ankle problems as a result of the war, but only recently began getting medical treatment and receiving payments from the U.S. government. Now that he's a trained service officer, Vigil said he hopes he can help others get their benefits much sooner than he did.

"It's a way to give back to other vets," said Vigil, a short man who wore a jacket that read, "Some gave all. All gave some."

"They make it complicated," he said, "and it's discouraging for vets, even though (the government) owes you this — the country owes you it."

Vigil was part of the first graduating class of American Indian service officers who received certification Thurs-



**VA officials say they hope Vigil and other Indian service officers will be more accessible for Indian vets because the officers live on pueblos and reservations and come from the same cultural background.**

# Veterans: Other states using program

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day to help other veterans file claims with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. It is the first effort in the country to train American Indians to help their own deal with the VA, said John Garcia, secretary of the state Department of Veterans Services, which organized the training. Twenty-one American Indians from tribes across New Mexico received the certification after taking a two-week course.

"In order to protect the sovereignty, we felt it was best to empower from within," Garcia said. "Being a service officer is not about the money. It's about service to fellow veterans. There are people out there who need you."

Service officers are important links for veterans because they can help navigate the huge bureaucracy that is the VA. Monthly payments for disabilities are based on a complicated ratings system that service officers in New Mexico understand. They can also help connect veterans with services like counseling for post-traumatic stress disorder or health care for their families. At least 5,600 American Indian veterans live in New Mexico, according to the Department of Veterans Services, and many of them have never sought treatment or payments from the VA.

When service officers prepare paperwork for veterans, the monetary awards they receive are

significantly higher, according to Lou Helwig, the director of field services for the state Department of Veterans Services.

New Mexico's service officers are among the best in the country when it comes to filing claims and getting money for veterans, Helwig said.

"It's like walking into a doctor's office and asking a physician's assistant what's wrong with you instead of asking your friend who is walking down the street with you," Helwig said. "They know the basic elements of the legal claim to present to the government. They know the buzz words. They know how to request evidence of injuries and how to interview veterans."

Helwig said the hope is the new Indian service officers will be more accessible for Indian vets — both because they live on pueblos and reservations and because they come from the same cultural background.

"Native Americans in New Mexico are just now learning about many of the benefits that they are eligible for," Helwig said. "There has never been anyone who can guide them through the process from within the tribes."

New Mexico's training program, which began this spring, is now being copied by other states. Another training for American Indian service officers will begin next spring, Helwig said.

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