



THE NAVAJO NATION

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT & VICE PRESIDENT

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Navajo President Joe Shirley, Jr., First Lady Vikki Shirley accept 'First Things First' check for \$2.6 million for kids

ST. MICHAELS, Ariz. – Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., and First Lady Vikki Shirley received a total of \$3.1 million from the new Arizona non-profit program "First Things First" to develop culturally relevant early child care and education programs for children aged newborn to five years old.

First Things First is the nonprofit organization that oversees the use of state taxes collected from tobacco sales. Mrs. Basha's vision and leadership have been credited with the concept and 2006 statewide voter approval of the initiative.

Making the presentation of a check for \$2.6 million, plus an additional \$572,000, at the Karigan Child Care Center here Tuesday was Nadine Mathis Basha, board chair of First Things First of Arizona and the first recipient of the University of Arizona's Frances McClelland Institute for Children, Youth, and Families Vision Award. The award, the first ever to be presented, will be given to Mrs. Basha on March 6.



Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., and First Lady Vikki Shirley received a check for \$2.6 million from First Things First Chairwoman Nadine Mathis Basha (in red) on Tuesday at the Karigan Child Care Center in St. Michaels. Over the next 10 years, it is hoped that the Navajo Nation will receive \$26 million from the voter-approved program – if the Arizona Legislature does not decide to take the funding to meet the state's budget shortfall. From left to right are Navajo Nation Board of Education member Tim Bitsilly, Bessie Allen, Dr. Paula Curley, Council Delegate Andy Ayze, Council Delegate Larry Anderson, President Shirley, Mrs. Shirley, Mrs. Basha, Spencer Willie, Dorothy Yazzie, Paula Seanez, and Dolly C. Begay. In back at left is First Things First Executive Director Elliot Hibbs.

"First Things First of Arizona and the Navajo Nation have an unprecedented opportunity to work in partnership to build an early childhood system that affords all children an equal chance to reach their full potential," she said.

Mrs. Basha said the First Things First board met last week and decided to add funding to some of the regional partnership councils because of the vast distances their members must travel.

Mrs. Basha said First Things First of Arizona and the Navajo Nation have an unprecedented opportunity to work in together to build an early childhood system that affords all children and equal chance to reach their full potential.

In accepting the check on behalf of the Navajo Nation Regional Partnership Council, President Shirley said the Navajo Nation appreciates all that Mrs. Basha and her

husband, Eddie Basha, have done for Navajos and the Navajo Nation. He said that he, First Lady Vikki Shirley and Navajo voters worked to get the First Things First initiative approved in 2006.

Now, he said, the program will benefit some 12,000 Navajo children.

"For about a good six years, we've been advocating education first, children first, the young ones first," the President said. "That's the way it has been. And the reason being they're our future, and it's going to be them they're going to be able to carry on our government, our nation, our way of life, our land."

He said that one of the most important needs that affects every Navajo family at one time or another is the need for quality child care.

"Each one of our communities – we have 110 – need child care centers, and we're working as hard as we can to bring it to fruition, and this is one of the ways in which we are doing it," President Shirley said.

In the Navajo program, children learn to speak in the Navajo language and cultural aspects of the program are strongly encouraged.

"I'd like to see us continue to be 100 years down the road, 500 years, and the secret is in the language," he said. "If we can continue the language, we will continue to sing the sacred songs, continue to say the sacred prayers and carry on with our way of life."

Mrs. Shirley, who is a member of the Navajo Nation Regional Partnership Council for First Things First, said the money means improvements in the quality of child care services across the Navajo Nation.

"We've been told this \$2.6 million will continue for the next 10 years, that's guaranteed," she said. "If things continue the way they are ... we're guaranteed \$26 million from this program."

She said the uses of the money are:

- To increase culturally-responsive quality early care and education in child care centers.

- Help home-based child care providers across Navajo Nation become licensed as child care providers.

- Increase the number of well-trained child care education professionals through educational assistance, scholarships and incentives to pursue degrees.

- Support and increase family education and outreach.

Dr. Paula Curley, state policy and advocacy director for Save the Children, said that the Karigan Center is one of 28 Navajo centers.

"We all realize that early intervention is what we need to have happen for the children of the Navajo Nation and for the children throughout the country," Dr. Curley said.

Alfred Yazzie, Navajo Nation Child Care and Development program manager, said there is a great amount of need on the Nation.

"It's so easy to say we're going to improve this and that, but it takes a lot of money," he said.

He said the Karigan Center is the only one on the Navajo Nation equipped as well as it is after 10 years.

"There's no other child care center on Navajo like this," he said. "We're always at full capacity. We're practically run over by children."

He said there were 45 children on stand-by to get into the program. There are more than 40 staff working there.

"We need people who can come in and help young parents, young families," he said. "We're so happy this initiative is coming through."

Also attending the presentation was Navajo Nation Council Education Committee Chairman Andy Ayze and Council Delegate Larry Anderson. Mr. Ayze read a letter of support for First Things First.

"First Things First is going to bring a brighter future to our young children, so we wanted to say thank you," Mr. Ayze said.