



Navajo Nation Council - Office of the Speaker

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Public Safety Committee appreciates support letter sent to President Bush by U.S. Senators

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – The Navajo Nation Public Safety Committee thanks several U.S. Senators for their support in advocating on behalf of the Navajo Nation in a letter sent to U.S. President George W. Bush on Dec. 19, 2007.

Council Delegate Hope MacDonald-Lone Tree (Coalmine Canyon/Toh Nanees Dizi), Chair of the Public Safety Committee (PSC), said that the PSC has been advocating for increased funding from the federal government, as well as other funding sources in order to build desperately needed jail facilities on the reservation.

The 11 U.S. Senators asked President Bush in the letter to be mindful of the public safety crisis in Indian Country when considering his funding priorities for fiscal year 2009. It was explained that the conditions and funding of Indian tribal detention facilities are in such dire state that Indian communities are not adequately protected and the rule of law is not adequately enforced.

According to reports from the Department of Justice (DOJ), violent crimes on Indian reservations are twice the national average. Tribal detention facilities in Indian communities are insufficient to accommodate criminals. To make matters worse, facilities are also underfunded, understaffed, overcrowded and are in despair.

The Senators also explained that the United States, through the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the DOJ either operate or fund detention facilities throughout Indian Country as part of its trust responsibilities to Native Americans. The option to subcontract with local agencies for detention space or operate detention facilities through federal contracts with the BIA was suggested by the Senators, pursuant to the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act.

The letter references a 2004 report by the Department of Interior General that confirmed that detention facilities in Indian Country are "Neither Safe nor Secure." The report states that "it became abundantly clear that some facilities we visited were egregiously unsafe, unsanitary, and a hazard to both inmates and staff alike. BIA's detention program is riddled with problems... and is a national disgrace."

The letter continued by saying that "while we understand the BIA may be issuing a report on the status and needs of Indian tribal detention facilities next spring, we cannot wait to begin resolving this crisis."

The letter concludes by stating that "the current funding levels for tribal prison construction through DOJ and operation, maintenance, facility improvement, and repair of existing facilities through BIA are woefully deficient. Consequently, in order to fulfill the United States' trust responsibility to Native Americans and to begin addressing the public

safety crisis in Indian Country, we urge you to at least double these funding levels in your FY 2009 budget.”

Edmund Yazzie (Thoreau), Vice Chair of the PSC, said that the Navajo Nation continues to experience a crisis in law enforcement, which is due to the lack of detention facilities. Severe deterioration of jail facilities has resulted in prisoners being kept only overnight in three of the six available dilapidated adult detention facilities.

As of January 2008, the Navajo Nation has only 61 beds for the entire reservation. This problem creates a revolving door for many inmates and it results in many inmates serving only a portion of their sentence, which is due to the lack of available detention facilities.

“This problem of the revolving door will only get worse, unless we build more detention facilities,” MacDonald-Lone Tree said. “Criminals arrested on the Navajo Nation are essentially getting a ‘get out of jail free’ card.”

MacDonald-Lone Tree added that “it takes no imagination whatsoever to understand the harrowing impact that these high crime rates cause to not only the victims, but also to their communities.”

Adequate funding for the provision of basic public safety services is an essential part of any strategy to reduce crime rates in Indian Country. Native Americans deserve to live in a safe and secure environment, the same enjoyments that are afforded to most Americans.

MacDonald-Lone Tree and the PSC urges the U.S. Senators to continue supporting and seeking the highest possible funding for public safety in Indian Country, especially for correctional facilities on tribal lands.

“We look forward to working closely with the U.S. Congress to address public safety concerns on the Navajo Nation,” MacDonald-Lone Tree said. “Public safety is a fundamental element in the preservation of the Navajo people, Navajo communities, and the Navajo culture,” MacDonald-Lone Tree added.

The 11 U.S. Senators include U.S. Sen. Jon Kyle (R-AZ), Sen. Pete Domenici (R-NM), Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-NM), Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-UT), Sen. Byron Dorgan (D-ND), Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), Sen. John Thune (R-SD), Sen. Benjamin Nelson (D-NE), Sen. Max Baucus (D-MT), Sen. Jon Tester (D-MT), and Sen. Tim Johnson (D-SD).

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