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Law and Order Committee approves legislation urging BIA and IHS to fund routine infectious disease screenings in Navajo Nation jails

WINDOW ROCK – The Law and Order Committee on Monday, approved legislation urging the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Indian Health Service to provide funding for routine infectious disease screening and control program in all Navajo Nation jails.

Legislation No. 0310-13 seeks to ensure that the Navajo Nation adheres to the required federal guidelines to operate tribal jail facilities.

The Indian Self-Determination Contract P.L. 93-638 with the U.S. Department of the Interior implemented the Bureau of Indian Affairs Adult Detention Facility Guidelines, which aims to provide a safe environment within the correctional facilities for the community, staff, volunteers, and inmates.

“Infectious diseases is not a problem unique to just the Navajo Nation, but is widespread and affects corrections staff that are in contact with the inmates on a daily basis,” said legislation prime sponsor Council Delegate Walter Phelps (Cameron, Coalmine Canyon, Leupp, Tolani Lake, Tsidi To’ii).

According to the report, the Navajo Nation currently does not have official protocol procedures to administer medical screenings for infectious diseases to inmates, upon intake into the correctional facilities. The three prevalent high-risk infectious diseases that are found in most jail facilities are tuberculosis (TB), Hepatitis C, and HIV/AIDS.

Navajo Nation Department of Corrections administrative service officer Stephanie Baldwin, stated that tribal jails currently use a self-reporting health questionnaire that is given to inmates to identify health problems to the corrections staff.

“NNDOC does not have certified medical personnel to administer official infectious disease screenings, but we ensure that our staff have annual physical exams and obtain up-to-date shots to avoid contracting any diseases,” said Baldwin.

Delegate Phelps said a TB outbreak occurred in the Tuba City Detention Center between March and April of this year.

“We are here today because of an incident at the Tuba City [detention] facility where 44 inmates and staff were affected by a TB outbreak due to an undiagnosed inmate that came into contact with these individuals,” said Delegate Phelps.

LOC vice chair Council Delegate Alton Joe Shepherd (Jeddito, Cornfields, Ganado, Kin Dah Lichii, Steamboat) requested for additional data and statistics regarding infectious diseases to illustrate the significant need for funding from the BIA and IHS.

LOC voted 2-0 to approve Legislation No. 0310-13. The legislation now goes to the Health, Education and Human Services Committee for consideration.

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