23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL
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MEDIA CONTACTS
Jared Touchin (928) 221-9253
Jolene Holgate (928) 380-4174
Crystalyne Curley (928) 286-7918
nnlb.communications@gmail.com

Arizona Department of Public Safety addresses seatbelt safety and gang violence with the Law and Order Committee

PHOTO: Arizona Department of Public Safety reports to the Law and Order Committee in Window Rock, Arizona on July 28, 2016.

WINDOW ROCK – On Thursday, the Law and Order Committee received a report from the Arizona Department of Public Safety regarding issues and concerns related to public safety and traffic laws pertaining to the use of seatbelts on the Navajo Nation.

On July 21 during the 2016 Summer Council Session, AZDPS District Three Commander Gary Phelps, Jr. delivered a report to the 23rd Navajo Nation Council regarding the increase of seatbelt injuries and fatality collisions on the Navajo Nation. LOC members recommended AZDPS to provide a more detailed report including statistics.

According to Commander Phelps, AZDPS officers only patrol highways with right away, such as US-191, US-163, SR-98, SR-264, and I-40. In 2014, AZDPS recorded 29 collision injuries and collision fatalities in which victims were not using seatbelts. In 2015, the number of injuries and fatalities grew to 90, a 210-percent increase.

LOC member Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay, Jr. (Low Mountain, Many Farms, Nazlini, Tachee/Blue Gap, Tselani/Cottonwood) urged the Navajo Nation Division of Public Safety to increase the enforcement of seatbelt usage.

"Who is taking this initiative at NNDPS? This is frustrating because an outside department of the Nation has to tell us that we have a problem here. We need recommendations from NNDPS to reinforce traffic laws on the Nation," stated Delegate Begay.

NNDPS executive director Jesse Delmar stated that drivers are responsible for using their seatbelts and that NNDPS is doing what they can to promote seatbelt usage. He also stated that the Nation needs to establish seatbelt laws that are enforceable.

"The statistics from AZDPS tells me that the Nation has a major seatbelt problem. My recommendation is to start using the media and billboards to bring seatbelt awareness because we need to ensure the safety of our people and children. Our Nation needs to start buckling up," stated LOC vice chair Council Delegate Raymond Smith, Jr. (Houck, Klagetoh, Nahata Dziil, Tsé Si áni, Wide Ruins).

LOC member Council Delegate Otto Tso (Tó Nanees Dizi) stated that the Nation should establish stricter laws and increase traffic fees to deter traffic violations.

LOC member Council Delegate Herman Daniels, Jr. (Shonto, Naa'tsis'Áán, Oljato, Ts'ah Bii Kin) recommended for the New Mexico Department of Public Safety, Utah Department of Public Safety, and the Alamo and Ramah Police Departments to provide a similar report to determine if there is a correlation in injuries and fatality collisions resulting from the lack of seatbelt usage.

AZDPS will increase patrol on speeding and seatbelt restraints on the Nation and will coordinate with NNDPS on the initiative, added Commander Phelps

LOC members and AZDPS also discussed a possible partnership to address gang violence in the rural community of Pinon, an issue that the LOC continues to focus on.

AZDPS FBI Task Force detective Kevin Claridge said there has been a drastic increase of gang activity and violence in Pinon and surrounding communities. The goal of AZDPS is to create a partnership with NNDPS and the FBI to pursue a proactive approach, added Detective Claridge.

"There is a critical need for a police district in Pinon. I am thankful that AZDPS has also identified that there is a gang problem. NNDPS needs to do something to address the problem. The committee's goal is to create a police district," added Delegate Begay.

LOC members will continue discussions with AZDPS to move forward with developing and establishing a partnership to combat gang violence in the community of Pinon. The Law and Order Committee approved the report with a 4-0 vote.

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