



Contact: Erny Zah
Director of Communications

Cell: (928) 380-0771

navajonationpress@navajo-nsn.gov

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Navajo President Shelly Meets With Federal Head Start Officials

Window Rock, Ariz. – Navajo President Ben Shelly advocated for Navajo Head Start during the second tribal consultation with the Administration for Children and Families.

The consultation was held last week on Wednesday and Thursday, which included Navajo officials meeting with Office of Head Start Director Yvette Sanchez-Fuentes and the Deputy Secretary Linda Smith of the Administration for Children and Families.

“I am advocating for my grandchildren in the Head Start program. Please keep the hearts, minds and spirits of these little children in your discussions for the next two days,” President Shelly said at the beginning of the two-day meeting.

Discussions of the meeting included the Designation Renewal System, a system that determines the quality and comprehension of a Head Start Program by measuring performance in nutritional, health, educational and the social needs of Head Start students. Negative reviews under DRS rules could force a program to compete for funding to continue services.

For the Navajo Nation, this could mean that Navajo Head Start would have to compete for \$27 million annually to keep current service levels for nearly 2,100 Head Start students.

President Shelly advocacy for Navajo Head Start successfully held off permanent termination and a significant reduction of funds to the program last year. President Shelly and Vice President Rex Lee Jim have continually informed federal officials that Navajo Head Start would work to improve the program by restructuring to comply federal regulations.

The Navajo Nation was moved to the DRS process because a triennial review in April of 2010 found nine deficiencies. Navajo Head Start has to improve school performance measures, relationships between the staff and children in the classrooms, and age appropriate classroom set up.

However, the DRS process requires that the federal government provide training and technical assistance. Moreover, the Navajo Nation will continue to restructure the program to meet the requirement to hire highly qualified staff at management levels and service delivery levels.

“I want to know what these regulations will look like for the Navajo Nation and what technical assistance will be offered. I want this partnership to continue to ready our children for school while we continue to teach them their Navajo identity,” President Shelly said.

Tribal officials also said the personnel and finance process in Navajo Head Start needed to be streamline and will need to quickly hire highly qualified staff that have worked in school systems.

By the end of March, Navajo Head Start plans to develop a quality improvement plan that will benefit Navajo Head Start as it deals with personnel and finance, and improving the skills of teaching staff. In discussions last week, the existing Memorandum of Agreement between the Navajo Nation and the Office of Head Start, were amendments made to assist the Navajo Nation with exploring the possibility of providing funds for construction and renovation of head start buildings.

“The Navajo Head Start program began in the 1960’s along side many of our chapter houses,” President Shelly said, adding that Head Start programs have a mainstay for Navajo people, which makes changes harder to implement because Navajo people have grown accustom to established practices.

“It will be a challenge the new director, Ms. Sharon Singer, to move Navajo Head Start forward into compliance,” President Shelly said.

Singer was hired in October, filling a position that was vacant for nearly a year.

“We expect resistance to the changes, but it will be to improve the services for the children and families. We have to remember that we nearly lost the entire grant last year and we are grateful that the federal government is working with us to maintain the grant. This means the Navajo Nation has to work hard to rebuild the program to meet the federal regulations,” President Shelly stated.

The Navajo Nation is the only tribal super grantee in Head Start with other super grantees serving areas of Los Angeles, Baltimore, Chicago and Phoenix. If the Navajo Nation does well during the re-evaluation in March of 2014, then the grant will be renewed for another 5 years.

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