



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
 December 9, 2014

President Shelly, Sen. Munoz join forces to fight alcoholism in Gallup



President Shelly said he marched on Santa Fe with Sen. George Munoz's father and former Gallup Mayor Eddie Munoz. He said the fight against the liquor and alcohol establishments means battling their powerful lobbyists. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

GALLUP, N.M.—Alcohol is big business.

Efforts to come to grips with alcohol related fatalities and crimes in the city of Gallup isn't anything new. In the 1980s, the city was dubbed "Drunk Town, USA" and sensationalized news reports spread the name nationally.

City leaders from that era joined forces with tribal and county leadership to march on Santa Fe to bring attention to the issue. During that time, McKinley County Commissioner Ben Shelly joined the contingent of citizens fed up with the alcohol related fatalities and crimes.

The group's efforts eventually resulted in closure of drive-up package liquor sales in Gallup and millions of dollars in federal funding for the construction and operation Na'nizhoozhi Center,

Inc. In June 2013, the funding dried up for NCI and the non-profit organization was forced to close their doors after more than 20 years of service.

On Oct. 24, 2013, the Navajo Nation entered into a memorandum of agreement with the city of Gallup and McKinley County to reopen the center. Since taking over management of the Gallup Detoxification Center on Jan. 1, 2014, the Navajo Department of Behavioral Health Services has spent more than \$582,000 providing services.

The city of Gallup has contributed \$320,000 to DBHS for an operating budget of close to \$1 million. The city funds were collected from the Alcohol Excise Tax at a rate of 10 percent. Despite this joint effort to fight alcoholism, the MOA has fallen

short of meeting the full extent of needs related to providing treatment to those in need.

Partnership is the key

On the evening of Dec. 8, President Shelly joined state, county and city officials to focus on the swelling number of people going through the detox center, numbers that have averaged about 2,400 people per month. Sen. George Munoz hosted the meeting at the Lighthouse Church in Gallup, which was packed with hundreds of people.

Munoz encouraged the audience not to dwell on what went wrong with NCI, but to instead focus on solutions and moving forward with the Gallup Detox Center. Given the number of people in attendance, he was determined to maintain a respectful atmosphere.

"I do have some ground rules for the meeting," Munoz said. "There will be no racial remarks. No outbursts, no speaking out of turn.

"This is not a blame game. This is solution road," he added.

President Shelly was the first to speak and reflected on the march to Santa Fe with former Gallup Mayor Eddie Munoz.

"We fought the liquor establishments. It's very hard to fight them, their lobbyists are very powerful," President Shelly said.

President Shelly said that during his tenure as county commissioner, he never approved the renewal of any alcohol licenses. The effort was often for naught, however, because the N.M. Gaming and Alcohol Division would eventually overrule their decision, he said.

“We need to put our heads together and take care of this alcohol thing. We need to start talking to business people,” President Shelly said, in reference to liquor store and bar owners.

Gallup Fighting Back

David Conejo provided a history of Fighting Back initiative back from 1989, when Gallup was in the headlines for 31 deaths related to alcohol. The fatalities were from exposure, driving while intoxicated and people getting run over by trains. He said the turning point was a head-on collision involving a white DWI motorist that killed three natives in the other vehicle.

“In particular, this accident was important because it was an Anglo that ran into a Native American family. Now we (were able to) bring the attention to the universal aspect of this problem,” Conejo said.

He said the march to Santa Fe resulted in \$400,000 in seed money to study the feasibility of a detoxification center in Gallup. Once the center was built, it was under the management of the hospital for a period of two years, and provided medical and social detoxification. A \$3 million grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation got the facility off the ground.

People who went through the center were held for three days and some were referred to a 28-day rehabilitation program, and others to an intake-shelter-bed program for adolescents. However, Conejo said the most important aspect was the work rehabilitation program that provided employment through construction and laundry services or a kiln that produced cups, plates and other wares.

“At the end of 90 days, people would be able to go out and seek employment and use us for a reference. We could say they’ve been through treatment, they’ve been through rehab and they’ve been gainfully employed,”

Conejo said.

Gallup Detox Center

Since taking over the Gallup Detox Center in Jan., the DBHS has averaged about 2,400 clients per month. The lowest admissions at the center occurred in June with 2,014 people and the highest was in August with 2,699.

Ramona Antone Nez, division director for the Navajo Department of Health, said DBHS is addressing the “revolving door” effect of the center. She said medical detox services will be contracted out and that the 12-hour hold will be increased to 72 hours for protective custody. Her timeline for implementation was one week.

“The Navajo Nation respectfully requests that the Gallup Police Department resume patrolling the ditches, arroyos and alleys for individuals who are intoxicated and the greatest at risk to exposure,” Nez said.

She also mentioned the need to repair the HVAC system of the detox center. With the new policy changes, the annual budget for protective custody, intervention, treatment, medical detox and aftercare treatment will rise up to \$2 million.

“We appreciate and accept the assistance of Senator Munoz to advocate for state resources,” Nez said.

The meeting concluded with a question and answer period.



Ramona Antone Nez, the newly appointed division director for the Navajo Department of Health, said the Gallup Detox Center needs to end the “revolving door” effect by keeping clients longer than 12 hours and providing them with medical detox in some cases. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



Navajo Nation Council Delegate Edmund Yazzie said, “This is not only a Navajo issue, this is an all-races issue.” Yazzie noted the fact that there wasn’t a single liquor store or bar owner in attendance at the meeting to hear the issues facing Gallup. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



David Conejo, a former hospital administrator and mastermind behind the Fighting Back initiative, said that Gallup is in the same position it was in back in 1989, when they made headlines for 31 alcohol related deaths ranging from exposure to DWI. (Photo by Rick Abasta)