



THE NAVAJO NATION

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT & VICE PRESIDENT

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Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., meets with federal Head Start officials about corrective actions

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., met with federal Head Start officials from Washington, D.C., here today to present the Nation's Corrective Action Plans in order to have a suspension of the Navajo Head Start Program lifted as soon as possible.

President Shirley welcomed Head Start Director Channell Wilkins, Assistant Director Frank Fuentes, and staff members Camille Loya and Valerie J. Pels. The officials met with the President, his staff, and Navajo division directors of Health, Education, Community Development, Government Services, the Navajo Environmental Protection Agency, Navajo Justice Department and other departments.

"We're all on the same side trying to do right by the children, the parents," President Shirley said. "We've been working very hard under stressful conditions. Of course, we'd like to get the program up and running by tomorrow."

The President emphasized that this is not simply a priority of one department but a priority of the entire Navajo Nation. The program serves upwards of 4,000 children, he said.

Because of this, he brought in most of his cabinet-level division directors to compose the core team to ensure corrective measures are designed and implemented immediately. Heading up the initiative is Isabelle Walker, deputy chief of staff in the Office of the President and Vice President.

OPVP Chief of Staff Patrick Sandoval told the federal officials that the plan "is not just for the interim but for the long term."

Mr. Wilkins told President Shirley he and the federal team was pleased with the amount of progress and corrective work he and his staff have seen.

"I'm very impressed with the work that has been done," he said. "We're very enthusiastic with what has happened. The team was very impressed."

Darren Tungovia, human resources manager for the Navajo Head Start Program, reported that 594 Head Start employees have been cleared through the background check process, 104 employees are left to be cleared pending an FBI background check, 32 are awaiting a Navajo Nation background check, and more information is needed on 41 employees.



Federal Head Start Director Channell Wilkins, left, and Assistant Director Frank Fuentes, listen to a presentation on the Navajo Nation's Corrective Action Plans. He said his team was impressed with the amount of work completed toward having a suspension of the program lifted. Navajo President Joe Shirley, Jr., right, told the federal officials the Navajo Nation wants the Head Start Program to be re-opened as soon as possible.

He added that 24 employees have resigned, 20 are temporary employees, 19 are on 90-day probation, 104 remain to be assessed, 15 were fired as a result of their background check findings and three more are to be terminated but are awaiting a termination letter. There are a total of 862 employees, he said.

One area of concern has been with the delay in getting federal background checks completed by the FBI. President Shirley said he would like to request Mr. Wilkins boss, Health and Human Services Director Mike Levitt, to request the U.S. Dept. of Justice to ask the FBI to consider the Navajo Nation needs as a priority.

Mr. Tungovia said the drafting of a memorandum of agreement was underway so that the Bureau of Indian Affairs could help expedite the 90-day waiting period to have the checks completed.

Today's report to Mr. Wilkins and his staff covered the Navajo Nation's Corrective Action Plan to have the summary suspension of funding lifted, its 30-day corrective action plan to deal with the program's deficiencies that were deemed to constitute a threat, and the Nation's request for technical assistance for its grant application and to comply with the child safety restraint requirement for Head Start buses.

Regarding the corrective action plan to have the summary suspension lifted, it was reported that:

- Employee checks and assessment policies and procedures were adopted by the Navajo Nation Parent Policy Council on June 22, and that 564 of 784 employees were cleared for employment through background checks.
- The federally-required employee declaration and consent form that was developed by the Navajo Justice Dept. was also approved on June 22 by the parent council.
- It is now the Navajo Head Start human resources manager's responsibility to ensure that finger printing and background checks are completed in a timely manner.
- The Navajo Justice Department has provided five training sessions to staff on how to perform background checks and assessments.
- Monitoring reports on background checks and assessments will be provided on a monthly basis to the Head Start Parent Policy Council, and council members will participate in the hiring and firing of employees.

Regarding the 30-day corrective action plan to correct deficiencies:

- A core team of individuals was established to collaborate on the problems. The team is represented by the directors of the Divisions of General Services, Health, Education, Public Safety, Finance, Community Development and Environmental Protection.

Regarding the technical assistance requested by the Navajo Nation:

- Immediate help is sought for the Nation's grant application. The Head Start Monitoring report cited financial deficiencies and budget discrepancies. Technical assistance would help remedy these problems to prepare accurate budgets in the application.
- The Head Start Bureau has also been asked to assist with securing child safety restraints for Head Start buses so that they can be installed before the program begins.

One difficulty the Navajo Nation has faced has been preparing and implementing the correction action plan when no employees have been paid because of the federal suspension of funding. Filling the gap has been volunteers.

President Shirley said it's been especially difficult for Parent Policy Council members from throughout the Navajo Nation who have no reimbursements for traveling long distances for meetings. Consequently, he hopes the Navajo Nation Council will appropriate funding to have these volunteers paid.

"That has really been a big problem," he said. "We want to do right by your funding and for the children who need this program. Time is of the essence."

Leland Leonard, director of the Department of Diné Education, credited the core team with putting a workable and viable plan together.

"I think that the core team has done a wonderful job in laying down the roadmap in the correction action plan," he said. "There's a lot of work that's been done. Several key Head Start people and Department of Diné Education staff should be commended."

The commitment that we're getting from the various divisions is also appreciated, he said.

"All in an effort to get our kids back in these buildings and begin educating them again," he said.

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