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THE NAVAJO NATION

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Administration for Children and Families partially lifts suspension of Head Start funding

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – The federal Administration for Children and Families today partially lifted its suspension of federal funding for the Navajo Early Head Start program, clearing the way for the program to begin its summer session on Wednesday.

The lifting of the suspension of federal funding for the Early Head Start component frees \$9.2 million to be used. All that needed to be done as of Tuesday was to contact individuals who are to participate in the program.

Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., called word of the partial lifting of the funding suspension good news.

“It demonstrates that our steps to correct a big problem are being recognized and acknowledged, and, as President of the Navajo Nation, I greatly appreciate that,” he said. “We’re doing everything we can to correct all of the deficiencies in our program and we hope to see it completed in short order.”

In a May 16 letter to the President, Associate Commissioner for the Head Start Bureau Channell Wilkins said he determined that the Navajo Nation has sustained its burden to show why the suspension should be lifted for the Early Head Start program with an exception for two employees.

Funding for Early Head Start and Head Start programs was suspended May 2 because it was determined the program failed to complete criminal background checks and assessments on Navajo Head Start employees which created a risk to the health and safety of staff and children participating in the programs. A show cause hearing on why it should be restored was held in Washington on May 8.

The suspension of funding for the Head Start program will continue until the Nation has fully implemented its Corrective Action Plan stated in President Shirley’s Executive Order No. 02-2006. That calls for the completion of criminal record checks and required assessments, among other steps.

Mr. Wilkins said that in order to assure ACF that there is no risk to the health and safety of children and staff, the Nation must demonstrate that no current Head Start employees will resume work in the Head Start program unless they either do not have a criminal record or, if an employee has a criminal record, they have undergone the required assessment and appropriate actions have been taken.

“With regard to the Navajo Nation Early Head Start program,” Mr. Wilkins wrote, “the Nation adequately demonstrated it had completed Navajo Tribal criminal background checks on all employees.”

He said the ACF had received and reviewed *Records of Arrest and Prosecution* for 17 Early Head Start employees. That demonstrated tribal criminal background checks were requested May 8, 2006, and were completed.

“In the course of our May 12-14 on-site review, we confirmed FBI criminal background checks had been completed for 16 Early Head Start direct services staff and 2 administrative staff, but that Navajo Nation checks had not been completed,” he said.

To address the Head Start issues and to ensure the Nation regains compliance with federal regulation, President Shirley established a task force to see that the work is completed. Among its members are Navajo Nation Attorney General Louis Denetsosie, Department of Education Director Leland Leonard, Navajo Division of Public Safety Director Samson Cowboy, Division of Human Resources Deputy Director Andre’ Cordero and Controller Mark Grant.

“If not for the hard work, dedication and long hours put in by these people and many of their staff, we wouldn’t have been able to present our position as well as we did to the Head Start Bureau, continue our progress through last week and get this program opened on schedule,” the President said. “I’d also like to express my appreciation to two Navajo Nation Department of Justice attorneys, Dana Bobroff and Regina Holyan, who did some much of the footwork to accomplish this.”

The Navajo Nation Corrective Action Plan, which was submitted May 8, sets seven corrective steps related to compliance with federal requirements. These are to:

1. Develop procedures that require all person(s), e.g., program staff and volunteers, who participate in the Early Childhood Development program to undergo criminal background checks prior to and during employment.
2. Develop extensive training for all Human Resources personnel in taking fingerprints for new hires such as volunteers, temporaries and consultants that cover regulations, correct fingerprint card and coordinated efforts with the local and national Law Enforcement agencies that conduct background checks.
3. Designate the Division of Early Childhood Development Human Resources Manager the responsibility of performing background checks in a timely manner.
4. Ensure that complete background checks are completed as soon as possible.
5. Conduct local Navajo Nation and other tribal background checks for all employees currently employed by the Office of Early Childhood Development, utilizing the Navajo Nation Division of Public Safety.
6. Ensure orientation is provided to all Human Resources personnel in what is required in a new hire process, and
7. Place all employees on administrative leave for which there is an incomplete background check until such time an employee assessment can be completed.

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