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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Second Navajo jail closure poses serious threat Navajo communities

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Citing safety hazards to inmates, the public and employees, the Navajo Division of Health, Office of Environmental Health Code Enforcement closed the Chinle public safety facility earlier this week.

The closure leaves the Navajo Nation with two less tribal jails to handle more than 44,000 arrests made within the Navajo Nation every year. The Tuba City Adult Detention facility was condemned in 2006.

The Chinle detention facility closure comes on the heels of the recent efforts by the Navajo Nation Public Safety Committee to secure increased funding for Navajo Nation public safety and would now require educating federal policy makers and officials of the new development.

Public Safety Committee Chairperson Hope MacDonald-Lone Tree (Coal Mine Canyon/Toh Nanees Dizi) said this recent closure underscores the need for Congress to honor its federal trust responsibility and to provide immediate emergency funding to the Navajo public safety. Further, Chairperson MacDonald-Lone Tree urgently stresses the need to elevate Navajo public safety as the top public policy priority within the Navajo Nation government and to collectively convey at the national and state levels until Navajo communities are assured of their safety.

Council delegate and former PSC member, Harry H. Clark (Chinle) said that the Chinle Chapter and the Chinle Agency Council will both have support resolutions to address the public safety crisis.

“We need to accommodate public safety with permanent facilities right away,” Clark said. “I’d like to see this as a real priority – public safety is being jeopardized in our communities throughout the Nation,”

MacDonald-Lone Tree concurred about the need to elevate the priority.

“Since the 20th Navajo Council, the Navajo Nation Public Safety Committee expressed serious concern regarding the emergency conditions involving Navajo Nation public safety,” MacDonald-Lone Tree said. “Today, the Navajo Nation can add one more dismal fact to the disturbing truth regarding the safety of Navajo families and communities.”

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According to available information, Navajo Nation law enforcement detains more than 9,000 offenders annually at the Chinle detention center. Approximately more than 400 offenders are for serious federal offenses involving child sexual abuse, murder, rape, drugs and violent felony assaults for the Chinle service district.

Currently, the Committee has requested Bureau of Indian Affairs to assist with emergency funding to help mitigate the Chinle detention facility's closure by contracting with the Gallup McKinley County Detention Center to house inmates from the Chinle and Tuba City adult detention centers.

Unfortunately, the Window Rock detention facility, or other Navajo facilities, cannot house additional inmates from Chinle and Tuba City.

"The Window Rock Detention Center was built to house 33 inmates, but at this time there are 50 inmates detained there from throughout the Navajo Nation," MacDonald-Lone Tree said. "The severe overcrowding in all of our jails would place us on the verge of a major public safety melt down."

Because of the overcrowding in Navajo Nation jails, necessary requests have been made to the courts to release offenders with less severe criminal offenses. However, the current majority of inmates is detained for serious criminal offenses. If released they would pose extreme threats to Navajo families and communities, not to mention victims. Communities are already too familiar with the "revolving door" dilemma posed on their safety and livelihood.

"The Navajo Nation criminal justice system has become a revolving door for criminals," Chairperson MacDonald-Lone Tree said. "As soon as criminals are arrested, they are released back into our communities because our detention facilities are either dangerously overcrowded or are closed for safety reasons. Communities will not be safe until long-term facilities are constructed."

PSC Committee Member Raymond Joe (Tachee/Whippoorwill/Blue Gap) will be sponsoring emergency legislation at next week's Navajo Nation Council Spring Session to establish an immediate facility for the Chinle police dispatchers.

"The communication center is crucial to the community and the police officers," Joe said. "It is their lifeline and the only form of communication among the public, them and the police dispatch."

PSC Vice-Chair Edmund Yazzie (Thoreau), a former police officer, expressed concern for the public. "With two shut down, the Navajo Nation faces further deterioration of law and order on Navajo land."

The closure of the Chinle facility magnifies the Navajo Nation Public Safety Committee efforts to bring this unresolved crisis to the U.S. Congress, the BIA, and the U.S. Department of Justice in securing emergency funding. The Public Safety Chairperson has been invited to testify before the U.S. House Subcommittee on Interior Appropriations that is scheduled for Wednesday, April 18, 2007 in Washington, D.C.

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