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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

**MacDonald LoneTree Educates Federal Officials
About Navajo Public Safety Issues**

Lack of Prison Space Has Created a Law Enforcement Crisis

MINNEAPOLIS -- With only 82 prison beds and conditions in half of the detention facilities in Navajo Nation severely deteriorated, criminals are only serving a portion of their sentences, Hope MacDonald LoneTree, chair of the Navajo Nation Public Safety Committee, said Tuesday, March 27 during testimony to a Tribal Training and Technical Assistance program that consists of five federal agencies.

MacDonald Lone Tree (Coalmine Canyon/Toh Nanees Dizi) told the federal officials that, "Congress must restore federal funding for prison construction in this year's budget and immediately address the crisis facing Navajo Nation."

"Currently, criminals who are arrested in Navajo Nation are essentially getting a 'get-out-of-jail-free' card," MacDonald Lone Tree said. "Since December, 1,163 individuals have been booked into the Tuba City facility, but because of dilapidated facilities and a mere 82 prison beds, only nine criminals are actually still serving time. This is unacceptable. The federal government has a moral obligation to work with us to ensure the families in Navajo Nation are safe. I urge Congress to take the first step by restoring prison construction funding within Department of Justice budget."

Chairwoman MacDonald Lone Tree presented her testimony during a Tribal Training and Technical Assistance (TT&TA) program, which is a federal multi-agency effort formed to address tribal justice issues. The TT&TA is comprised of the Department of the Interior (DOI), Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA); the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA); and the Department of Justice (DOJ), and Office of Justice Programs (OJP).

Department of Justice officials invited MacDonald Lone Tree to serve on a panel of leaders in Indian Country Public Safety to discuss ways for tribes to partner with other tribal, state, and federal law enforcement agencies.

MacDonald Lone Tree asked the Department of Justice Department officials, "How is the Navajo criminal justice system ever to adequately partner with other jurisdictions when all we do is release our criminals back into Navajo and neighboring communities?"

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Page 2-2-2/Begay/Tribal Training

The Navajo Nation has a population of more than 250,000 that resides an area larger than the state of West Virginia and includes more than one-third of the national on-reservation population of Indian Country. On the Navajo Nation, facilities have deteriorated so severely prisoners can only be kept overnight in three of the six adult detention facilities. Many inmates serve only a portion of their sentences due to the lack of available detention facilities.

According to Navajo Nation records, 1,163 individuals have been booked into the Tuba City facility since December 1, 2006, and all but 53 of them have been released. Those 53 prisoners were housed at other facilities, and only nine are currently serving time.

“The bottom line is that facilities in Navajo Nation aren’t fit to house humans,” MacDonald Lone Tree said. “Congress must restore funding for prison construction in Indian Country. Congress must also retain flexibility to address immediate needs. And in Navajo Nation, we’re facing a prison construction crisis. I am anxious to continue working with other tribal leaders to tell Congress that the tribal line items in DOJ budget must be kept.”

The Navajo Nation has recognized the lack of detention facilities as a paramount priority, and just recently enacted a 1 percent sales tax dedicated for detention and other public safety facilities.

“We have raised our own taxes -- despite the poor economic situation in Navajo Nation -- to address this vital issue,” MacDonald Lone Tree said. “It is time for the federal government to fulfill its trust responsibility and join us in providing funding for new detention facilities.”

The President’s 2008 Department of Justice budget proposes to create four large grant programs to replace more than 70 existing grant programs. The Tribal Prison Construction program was one of the programs slated for elimination. Also, the DOJ consolidation proposal does not provide any indication or surety that Indian programs will receive any funding or that Indian tribes will receive a fair portion of the broad and largely undefined block grant programs.

Also, BIA and DOJ have worked together to build 23 new detention facilities in Indian Country in the last decade. However, none of those jails were built on the Navajo Nation. Three facilities located in the Navajo Nation were on the DOJ’s priority list, but they have not received funding, while every other facility ahead of them has been built. Moreover, several other facilities ranking below those in Navajo Nation have also been constructed.

“Hopefully, the U.S. Congress and the Department of Justice will preserve elements of the Tribal Law Enforcement grant programs, especially the Tribal Prison Construction program so that the federal government can honor its trust responsibility to assist Navajo Nation with the unacceptable lack of detention facilities,” MacDonald Lone Tree said.

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