Navajo President Joe Shirley, Jr., First Lady Vikki Shirley accept 'First Things First' check for $2.6 million for kids

ST. MICHAELS, Ariz. – Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., and First Lady Vikki Shirley received a total of $3.1 million from the new Arizona non-profit program "First Things First" to develop culturally relevant early child care and education programs for children aged newborn to five years old.

Making the presentation of a check for $2.6 million, plus an additional $572,000, at the Karigan Child Care Center here Tuesday was Nadine Mathis Basha, board chair of First Things First of Arizona and the first recipient of the University of Arizona’s Frances McClelland Institute for Children, Youth, and Families Vision Award. The award, the first ever to be presented, will be given to Mrs. Basha on March 6.

"First Things First of Arizona and the Navajo Nation have an unprecedented opportunity to work in partnership to build an early childhood system that affords all children an equal chance to reach their full potential," she said.

Mrs. Basha said the First Things First board met last week and decided to add funding to some of the regional partnership councils because of the vast distances their members must travel.

First Things First is the nonprofit organization that oversees the use of state taxes collected from tobacco sales. Mrs. Basha’s vision and leadership have been credited with the concept and 2006 statewide voter approval of the initiative.
husband, Eddie Basha, have done for Navajos and the
Navajo Nation. He said that he, First Lady Vikki Shirley and
Navajo voters worked to get the First Things First initiative
approved in 2006.

Now, he said, the program will benefit some 12,000 Navajo
children.

"For about a good six years, we've been advocating
education first, children first, the young ones first," the
President said. "That's the way it has been. And the reason
being they're our future, and it's going to be them they're
going to be able to carry on our government, our nation, our
way of life, our land."

He said that one of the most important needs that affects
every Navajo family at one time or another is the need for
quality child care.

"Each one of our communities – we have 110 – need child
care centers, and we're working as hard as we can to bring
it to fruition, and this is one of the ways in which we are
doing it," President Shirley said.

In the Navajo program, children learn to speak in the Navajo
language and cultural aspects of the program are strongly
couraged.

"I'd like to see us continue to be 100 years down the road,
500 years, and the secret is in the language," he said. "If we
can continue the language, we will continue to sing the
sacred songs, continue to say the sacred prayers and carry
on with our way of life."

Mrs. Shirley, who is a member of the Navajo Nation
Regional Partnership Council for First Things First, said the
money means improvements in the quality of child care
services across the Navajo Nation.

"We've been told this $2.6 million will continue for the next
10 years, that's guaranteed," she said. "If things continue
the way they are ... we're guaranteed $26 million from this
program."

She said the uses of the money are:

• To increase culturally-responsive quality early care and
  education in child care centers.

• Help home-based child care providers across Navajo
  Nation become licensed as child care providers.

• Increase the number of well-trained child care education
  professionals through educational assistance, scholarships
  and incentives to pursue degrees.

• Support and increase family education and outreach.

Dr. Paula Curley, state policy and advocacy director for
Save the Children, said that the Karigan Center is one of 28
Navajo centers.

"We all realize that early intervention is what we need to
have happen for the children of the Navajo Nation and for
the children throughout the country," Dr. Curley said.

Alfred Yazzie, Navajo Nation Child Care and Development
program manager, said there is a great amount of need on
the Nation.

"It's so easy to say we're going to improve this and that, but
it takes a lot of money," he said.

He said the Karigan Center is the only one on the Navajo
Nation equipped as well as it is after 10 years.

"There's no other child care center on Navajo like this," he
said. "We're always at full capacity. We're practically run
over by children."

He said there were 45 children on stand-by to get into the
program. There are more than 40 staff working there.

"We need people who can come in and help young parents,
young families," he said. "We're so happy this initiative is
coming through."

Also attending the presentation was Navajo Nation Council
Education Committee Chairman Andy Ayze and Council
Delegate Larry Anderson. Mr. Ayze read a letter of support
for First Things First.

"First Things First is going to bring a brighter future to our
young children, so we wanted to say thank you," Mr. Ayze
said.