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Health, Education, and Human Services Committee commends how health care needs of Utah Navajos are being addressed and met

MONTEZUMA CREEK, Utah – The Health, Education, and Human Services Committee traveled on Sept. 12 to the Montezuma Creek Community Health Center where they learned more on how the health care needs of the Diné people are being met in the Utah portion of the Navajo Nation.

“I’m very honored that I get to speak to some of these issues in my hometown,” said Council Delegate Kenneth Maryboy (Mexican Water, Aneth, Teec Nos Pos, Tólikan, Red Mesa), who consistently does his best to bring attention to the unique needs of Diné citizens in Utah.

In this region, the Utah Navajo Health System, Inc. is delivering quality general and specialty health care services to the Diné people through four community health centers located in Navajo Mountain, Monument Valley, Blanding, and Montezuma Creek.

Incorporated in 2000, the UNHS is a private, non-profit 501(c)(3) corporation that provides medical, dental, and behavioral health services to Utah Diné.

Through its goal to “bring excellent quality healthcare to local communities in the Utah Strip and increase patient access to care,” all four facilities bring specialty health care services to their patients on a weekly, monthly, or quarterly basis – these in addition to the primary health care services that are already offered at each.

This eliminates the need for patients to have to travel to faraway hospitals in Salt Lake City or Cortez, Colo. to receive health care not offered at UNHS facilities, said Sylvia Ben, clinical director.

Council Delegate Charles Damon II (Bááháálí, Chichiltah, Manuelito, Tsé Łichíí’) was impressed with a recent contract UNHS negotiated with the Utah State Medicaid to provide patient non-emergency transportation with Medicaid reimbursement. This allows UNHS to transport its patients to cancer centers, nursing facilities, and dialysis centers, among others, outside of the Utah Strip.

In the last five years, UNHS has expanded podiatry and behavioral health services in Blanding, and have added dental offices, patient exam rooms, and expansions of the emergency room and the pharmacy at the Montezuma Creek health facility.

A unique feature of UNHS health care services is the manner in which Diné holistic health treatment is incorporated into their overall framework for quality health care. This discussion arose after Delegate Damon inquired for more information on the traditional healing benefits offered at the facilities.

Through funding from the state of Utah, patients who qualify for certain medical benefit programs receive \$100 to put toward the payment of traditional healing ceremonies and prayers to address their health needs.

“In Utah, we’re unique in a lot of ways. We are dealing with very traditional Navajos who would rather see a traditional medicinal practitioner to assess their health ailments and provide healing,” said Delegate Maryboy.

Delegates Maryboy and Jonathan Hale (St. Michaels, Oak Springs) made a recommendation for UNHS to work with the committee to request additional federal funds from Congress that would allow for the increase of monetary assistance, when warranted, for patients who may need lengthier and more intricate traditional healing ceremonies, which are usually more costly.

“The staff working here are all local and they want to see this as a health care facility that is unique and is responsive to the cultural and holistic needs of the patients that are served here,” said Rex Harvey, who works as a traditional liaison providing behavioral health and traditional outreach to the local communities.

The committee commended UNHS in their goal to invest in the continued educational development and growth of their employees. Diné staff employed with UNHS have demonstrated career growth within the health corporation over the length of their employment.

An example of this would be Harvey who had first started out as a lifeguard but has since advanced to become the primary traditional behavioral health liaison, said Byron Clarke, human resources director.

Maryboy lauded UNHS and their dedication to continually finding ways to integrate traditional health and healing philosophies into their overall paradigm for quality health care.

“In the outside world, many doctors will disagree with things that are not medically proven, but some of the doctors here will suggest for patients to see local traditional practitioners as an avenue of recovery or healing that the patient may be more comfortable with. I commend and encourage this type of endeavor for our people and their access to comprehensive quality health care,” said Delegate Maryboy.

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