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Health, Education, and Human Services Committee receives update on changes in delivery of social services to Leupp and Pinon communities

WINDOW ROCK – Responding to a May 23 written request issued by the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee, officials from the Navajo Nation Division of Social Services (DSS) appeared before the committee at a May 29 meeting to address concerns surrounding the delivery of services to the communities of Leupp and Pinon in the southwestern region of the Navajo Nation.

A report by DSS administrators was requested after concerned Leupp Chapter community members informed the committee on May 22 of news that DSS sub-offices in Leupp and Pinon were in the process of closing down, and that the Leupp sub-office would be relocated to Dilkon, Ariz.

“This is a serious concern and issue for all involved,” stated HEHSC chair Council Delegate Jonathan Hale (Oak Springs, St. Michaels) to Navajo DSS division director Sharon Begay-McCabe in a May 23 letter.

Navajo DSS legislative analyst Thomas Cody confirmed that the Pinon sub-office for the Program for Self-Reliance had been closed – primarily due to concerns that the current office facility had long been unmaintained, was “falling apart,” and DSS administrators were concerned for staff safety.

Inconsistent caseload ratio, the cost-efficiency of service delivery, limited resources in the community for clients to gain work experience and training, and the relocation of the Arizona Department of Economic Security services from Pinon to Chinle, Ariz. also contributed to the decision to close the Pinon sub-office, Cody said.

However, the division is working with Pinon Chapter officials to move and set-up three modular units across from the chapter, with hopes that one unit will be made into a DSS office for all area programs.

Currently, the Program for Self-Reliance has established an itinerant site and conducts weekly visits in Pinon to meet the needs of clients there.

Budget cuts from Navajo Nation, state, and federal funding sources had forced the division to “streamline services without impacting the welfare of [Navajo] children and families,” Cody stated.

“As you are aware, the [Bureau of Indian Affairs] has administered a 5% cut and the Navajo Nation anticipates another 14%,” wrote DSS division director Sharon Begay-McCabe in a May 28 response letter addressed to Delegate Hale.

As for the Leupp DSS sub-office, Cody said only two of current four employees would be relocated to Dilkon to provide services on a regional basis for the specialized child care program and case management.

“We’re not closing the Leupp office. All we’re doing is we’re attempting to move out of the current big facility,” said Cody, which has repeatedly been broken into and vandalized. The move to a smaller building would also be a cost-effective measure.

“I’m from Leupp. I think you should know that I would not close an office when I know there are services that are there, and I would fight for those services,” added Cody, who is a former Leupp Chapter president.

The Leupp sub-office will continue to provide adult in-care home services and a variety of financial services which includes general assistance and funerary burial assistance.

The two staff positions that will remain in Leupp to provide community social services will be those of the victim advocate and the community involvement specialist.

Speaking on the importance of retaining a victim advocate within the community, Cody said, “This is the individual that works with the chapter, housing, and schools. They coordinate those prevention activities and services.”

Council Delegate Walter Phelps (Cameron, Coalmine Canyon, Leupp, Tolani Lake, Tsidi Tó ii) pointed out that there are a number of schools in the vicinity of Leupp.

“These [educational] institutions need that support. It’s critical that you maintain an office in the Leupp community. I’m happy to hear you will be retaining the victim advocate there, and that you’re taking that all into consideration,” Delegate Phelps said.

While he was sure DSS administrators were keenly aware of the situations in the two communities affected by sub-office changes, Delegate Phelps suggested to HEHSC members that perhaps they needed to consider having a reliable third-party conduct an assessment.

“What is the impact from an outside professional perspective...from the way that work was done before to the way that the current structure is set up and the way they are providing services now? Are the needs being met?” Delegate Phelps questioned.

Delegate Phelps likened the scenario to that of a health patient who is told by one physician that he needs heart surgery. People usually visit another practitioner for a second opinion, to see if surgery is indeed really necessary, Delegate Phelps said.

At the close of the discussion, HEHSC chair Delegate Hale requested for DSS to keep the committee abreast of their communications and other proceedings with the affected chapters as streamlining measures continue to unfold.

Both the HEHSC and DSS are currently waiting for written comments and recommendations to be finalized from a town hall meeting that was held in Leupp on May 8 to address the state of social services in the community.

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