



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
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## **Health, Education, and Human Services Committee and Law and Order Committee discuss emergency response issues**

BLACK FALLS, Ariz. – Members of the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee and the Law and Order Committee met with representatives from law enforcement, public safety, Coconino County, Navajo Nation Office of the President and Vice President, Rural Addressing Initiative, health care providers, and Black Falls residents to discuss first response challenges and issues.

HEHSC member Council Delegate Walter Phelps (Cameron, Coalmine Canyon, Leupp, Tolani Lake, Tsidi To ii) — representative of the Black Falls community which is a part of the former Bennett Freeze area — arranged for the joint-committee meeting in this remote community to provide emergency service representatives a first-hand perspective of the living conditions and rough terrain that residents contend with on an every day basis.

Black Falls is approximately 27 miles northwest of the community of Leupp.

Delegate Phelps said he wanted everyone at the meeting to experience the long commute on rough roads to Black Falls to give them a realistic idea of what residents deal with daily.

He noted that many were late to the meeting because the water level had risen too high in one area of a road which made travelers detour using another route.

Recently, it was reported that a Black Falls resident died in a car accident on a long stretch of dirt road between Leupp and Black Falls.

Emergency personnel were not able to reach the victim immediately because of confusion over which emergency personnel was obligated to respond to the accident due to service areas not being clearly defined in this remote area of the reservation, Delegate Phelps explained.

“This is not an isolated incident,” said Delegate Phelps. “Delayed responses are common and lives are lost because of it.”

Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon (Black Mesa, Forest Lake, Hardrock, Pinon, Whippoorwill) said his communities face similar problems, citing inaccessible roads for emergency vehicles, a lack of signage to direct emergency personnel, and a lack of communication technology and accessibility.

Community residents and representatives of the “Forgotten People” non-profit organization shared firsthand accounts of delayed emergency responses, and urged HEHSC and LOC members to work toward solutions that truly help their community.

Much of the discussion centered on the need for the Nation to create a Public Safety Answering Point — also known as a PSAP system — which is a specially equipped center that receives 911 calls which are then directed to the correct emergency services said Brian Tagaban, director of the Navajo Nation Telecommunications Regulatory Commission.

Tagaban further explained that in order to implement a PSAP system, clearly defined addressing and service area boundaries must first be developed.

Delegate Witherspoon offered several suggestions including acquiring a helicopter for emergency personnel to reach remote areas quickly, developing telecommunications infrastructure for emergency personnel and community members, and establishing a cross commission agreement with Coconino County so they would also be able to respond to emergencies on the reservation also.

HEHSC and LOC members expressed their condolences to community members, and said they will support legislation that helps them and their community to establish communications and emergency service needs.

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