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Health, Education, and Human Services Committee receives report from the ‘First Things First’ Early Childhood Development and Health Program

WINDOW ROCK – The Health, Education, and Human Services Committee heard a report on Mar. 6 from Melissa Begay, regional director of the Navajo Nation’s ‘First Things First’ early childhood development and health program, in which the program’s strategies, challenges, and goals for the next three years were outlined.

First Things First began in 2006 when Arizona voters approved Proposition 203, which established an 80 cent tax on tobacco products sold in the state with tax revenue going directly to the statewide program.

Council Delegate Walter Phelps (Cameron, Coalmine Canyon, Leupp, Tolani Lake, Tsidi To ii) expressed satisfaction in seeing state tax dollars having a direct positive impact on Navajo children.

“We need to see more state dollars coming back to Navajo,” said Delegate Phelps. “I’m very glad that it’s happening.”

The program is credited with opening five preschools in Kayenta, one in Pinon, and plans to open more preschools in Chinle, Indian Wells, and Red Mesa.

HEHSC members recognized the efforts and accomplishments of the First Things First program, and recommended working closer with Navajo chapters to address such early childhood development needs like establishing more preschools to help working parents with child care needs.

Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon (Black Mesa, Forest Lake, Hardrock, Pinon, Whippoorwill) invited the program to assist chapter officials and his constituency from Black Mesa and Hardrock in establishing preschools, explaining that the Hardrock community recently lost one preschool due to a fire.

Aside from working with children in the preschool level, First Things First also plans to work with existing Navajo Nation programs to provide prenatal outreach to pregnant teens, which is something they say they have yet to fully implement.
Council Delegate Joshua Lavar Butler (To Nanees Dizi) acknowledged that some pregnant teens often feel ashamed and/or embarrassed by their pregnancy and neglect the needs of the unborn child. Sometimes, this might lead to alcohol and drug use.

Delegate Butler emphasized the need to educate young mothers and convey the importance of prenatal care—especially in the first trimester—to ensure a healthy pregnancy and birth.

Another component of the program called “Family, Friends, and Neighbors” provides at-home-babysitters with books, floor mats, and other learning tools to provide a safer and more learning conducive environment. This component is carried out in partnership with the Navajo Nation Childcare Development Funds Program, mentioned Begay.

This strategy is an effort to offset the growing demand of day care services for working parents.

Working parents often rely on friends, relatives, and neighbors for daytime child care because day care centers across the reservation have long waiting lists, making immediate enrollment nearly impossible.

This is an issue that affects communities that are trying to increase economic development opportunities and provide jobs for their people, said Delegate Phelps.

Delegate Phelps said he expects an influx in the workforce population in his communities of Leupp and Tsidi To ii due to the opening of the Twin Arrows Casino in Leupp and the opening of a manufacturing plant in nearby Winslow, but worries about a lack of childcare services available for those working parents.

HEHSC Chairperson Council Delegate Jonathan Hale (Oak Springs, St. Michaels) praised First Things First for future plans to collaborate with the Diné Culture and Language Program to develop curriculum to begin teaching children and parents the Diné language and culture.

HEHSC members expressed strong support for such collaborations to maximize the Nation’s resources and ensured their continued advocacy for First Things First in the future.

HEHSC members voted to accept the report with four supporting and zero opposing.

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