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Health, Education, and Human Services Committee approves funding for summer youth employment

TSAILE, Ariz. – On Monday, the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee approved Legislation No. 0166-17, in which the Navajo Nation Office of Diné Youth is seeking a supplemental appropriation for approximately $413,000 from the Unreserved, Undesignated Fund Balance to fund summer youth employment throughout the Navajo Nation.

According to the ODY department manager Ron Duncan, each Navajo chapter would receive four student employment positions—two for high school students and two for college students. The students will have a chance to decide which area they would like to work in that relates to their studies or background, if the opportunity is available in their area, said Duncan.

HEHSC chair and legislation sponsor Council Delegate Jonathan Hale (Oak Springs, St. Michaels) said many students come home to the Navajo Nation for the summer and are hoping to find work near their homes, and the supplemental funding would allow youth to find employment within their communities.

"We put pressure on our children to do the best they can, and this is an opportunity to provide employment to our youth near their homes. The Office of Diné Youth drew up the financial plan, so this is something our youth can look forward to when they come back for the summer," said Delegate Hale.

Delegate Hale pointed out that the legislation would meet the needs of high school and college students, and would provide them a chance to gain valuable work knowledge that they can add to their resumes and college applications.

HEHSC member Council Delegate Steven Begay (Coyote Canyon, Mexican Springs, Naschitti, Tohatchi, Bahastl'a'a') stressed the importance to incorporate traditional knowledge into the youth employment positions, and allow students to also work with Navajo elders at the senior centers or at their respective homes.

"Our youth are already out there learning a profession, but we are not promoting our traditional identities. This is an opportunity for students to learn our Navajo culture and language, so I would

recommend that we utilize a portion of the funds to let them work at senior citizen centers or at the elders' sheep camp. When youth learn our cultural ways, they can succeed anywhere. We have to instill that into our youth because it is our responsibility," said Delegate Begay.

Delegate Begay added that within his communities, Navajo elders have stated that they felt "lonely" because they are not able to communicate with their grandchildren in the Navajo language. The summer employment would enable youth to bridge the language barrier with their elders, as well as contribute to better academic performance, said Delegate Begay.

HEHSC member Council Delegate Nelson S. BeGaye (Lukachukai, Rock Point, Round Rock, Tsaile/Wheatfields, Tsé Ch' izhi) raised concerns regarding the number of youth employment positions at each chapter and the hourly pay rate, stating that it may not provide enough opportunities for Navajo students.

"I appreciate that the Office of Diné Youth is addressing the need for summer youth jobs, but the $413,000 is not enough—that's not investing in our youth. We need to increase the number of jobs for each chapter, as well as increase the hourly rate for the students. If the students are going to provide quality work with their academic knowledge, then their pay should reflect that," said Delegate BeGaye.

Delegate BeGaye recommended that the ODY also look into matching funds and external grant opportunities, as well as collaborating with colleges on the Navajo Nation such as Diné College and Navajo Technical University.

Delegate Hale said he would work with the ODY to amend the supplemental funding request to address his HEHSC colleagues' concerns to increase the number of employment positions and the hourly pay rate.

HEHSC members voted 3-0 to approve Legislation No. 0166-17, and moves forward to the Budget and Finance Committee for consideration. The Navajo Nation Council serves as the final authority on the bill.

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