



## Controller shares Hardship Assistance payments set to begin Jan. 18 in Budget and Finance Committee report

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**WINDOW ROCK, Ariz.** — On Tuesday, Jan. 5, the Budget and Finance Committee (BFC) of the 24th Navajo Nation Council received a report on the status of the Navajo Nation Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Fund Hardship Assistance Program from the Navajo Nation Office of the Controller (OOC) and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

The Navajo Nation CARES Fund Hardship Assistance Program was established by the Navajo Nation Council to provide direct emergency financial support to enrolled Navajo tribal members who have experienced negative impacts resulting from the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic.

Navajo Nation Controller Pearline Kirk shared that Navajo adults with valid applications are currently projected to receive up to \$1,300 in Hardship Assistance Program funding and minors receive a maximum \$455 with an estimated 91% of the program funded so far. The final amounts will rely on the total number of applicants and the final program balance, which Kirk said changes every day.

The Controller's expects payments to begin the week of Jan. 18, with the possibility of checks being sent in waves to prevent mass crowding of stores and retailers during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

Approximately 282,000 Hardship Assistance Program applications were received, 230,000 of which Kirk said have been processed successfully. Kirk also reported 9,000 Hardship Assistance Program applications were identified as duplicates, 10,000 had Certificate of Indian Blood (CIB) or date of birth issues and 41,000 applications were complicated by other issues, such as name changes.

Additionally, Kirk informed the Council \$414,179,818 of Navajo Nation CARES Funds were expended as of Dec. 31, 2020, with \$15,271,451 in open commitments remaining. Overall, the Navajo Nation received more than \$714 million in federal CARES Act Coronavirus Relief Funding that Council allocated to various response projects, including water, power and broadband infrastructure and more.

Kirk estimated a total of \$254,964,178 has been reverted from other projects to the Hardship Assistance Program so far and that the total is expected to reach \$324 million as the OMB continues to de-obligate unspent funds. OOC was still receiving invoices and agreements from Navajo Nation divisions and departments after the Dec. 28, 2020, de-obligation deadline set by the Council, Kirk said.

OOC and OMB also provided the BFC a more detailed breakdown of previous appropriations by the Council that have been reverted to the Hardship Assistance Program. Reallocations from Resolutions Nos. CJN-47-20, CJY-46-20 and CS-33-20 include bathroom additions, care packages, facilities and cleaning, broadband and other reversions to the hardship assistance balance.

The reversion of CARES Funds to the hardship program was a result of the Council's intention to ensure all federal funding was expended by the former Dec. 31, 2020, deadline. With the extension granted by Congress under the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, the Controller reported the extra time will be used to conduct further validation of applications but will not delay the Jan. 18 expected date for payments to begin for fully approved applications.

“There is no doubt that this is the largest hardship program in the nation. There are many unforeseen large-scale issues we have to address daily,” said Kirk. “Getting everything closed out thoroughly with the obligation process takes some time.”

In the coming days and weeks, the OOC will continue to address distribution challenges, including a printing capacity of 25,000 checks per day, potential delays in postal deliveries due to the pandemic and creating a will-call system for the 10,000 applicants who opted to collect their payment in person.

The OOC will also be training call center staff to answer check and payment-related questions that will arise during the distribution phase of the Hardship Assistance Program.

Kirk noted this process resulted in the addition of approximately 140,000 records to the Navajo Nation’s vital statistics electronic database, which will impact future initiatives that rely on Navajo Nation’s membership data.

More information on the Hardship Assistance Program can be found on the Navajo Nation Office of the Controller’s website at: <http://www.nnooc.org>.

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