



THE NAVAJO NATION

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September 18, 2015
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Begaye-Nez Administration Promotes Suicide Prevention



Navajo Nation Vice President Jonathan Nez reported before the Health, Education and Human Services Committee of the 23rd Navajo Nation Council to report on the suicide prevention effort by the Navajo Nation. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz.— On Sept. 16, by a vote of 4-0, the Health, Education and Human Services Committee of the 23rd Navajo Nation Council unanimously agreed to accept the report by the Utah Navajo Health Systems, Inc.

UNHS Board of Directors declared a state of emergency after the recent spate of suicides that gripped the community. The organization is located in Montezuma Creek, Utah.

“The rash of suicides has shaken the communities that we serve. The emotional toll on everyone has been significant,” said Robert Whitehorse, board chairman.

September is National Suicide Prevention Month and a call to action by the UNHS to

work with the Navajo Nation on creating a safety net against the effects of suicide.

“We will work with other agencies to increase awareness, provide additional educational tools, de-stigmatize the illnesses and treatments, network with healthcare and mental health professionals and increase our presence with primary and secondary schools,” Whitehorse said.

The root causes of suicide include poverty, depression, bullying, alcoholism, drug abuse and other social conditions.

Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye and Vice President Jonathan Nez have raised awareness on suicide prevention since taking office in May.

Vice President Nez spoke of a young Navajo male, set to graduate from high school in May, but instead took his own life.

“Suicide is just not a problem on Navajo, it’s a problem throughout Indian Country,” he said.

Vice President Nez said the declaration of emergency issued by the UNHS was proactive.

He encouraged the HEHSC to submit a letter of support to OPVP requesting an emergency declaration to release funding to UNHS for suicide prevention efforts. OPVP will begin the emergency declaration process.

In June, Vice President Nez reported before the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary

Sylvia Burwell and provided suggestions on fighting suicide, namely the establishment of a national workgroup to begin planning.

He recommended that the workgroup not just be comprised of bureaucrats, but include tribal leaders from around Indian Country. The appointments to the workgroup are forthcoming, he added, and encouraged a member of the HEHSC to join.

Suicide is an unacceptable subject matter for Navajo people, but the discussion must take place, Vice President Nez said.

“Everywhere I go, I try to bring up suicide prevention for our young people. It’s mostly our young Navajo men that are taking their own lives,” he said. “How do we address that?”

He said intergenerational teaching between the elders and youth is the answer.

“Many of us were probably raised by our grandparents talking to us in Navajo, letting us know that this is how life is to be. But now, our younger generation does not understand the language and there’s a gap,” Vice President Nez said. “Language is the foundation.”

The next interdisciplinary team meeting on suicide response and post intervention will take place on Sept. 22 at the Division of Dine’ Education Center.

