



THE NAVAJO NATION

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September 23, 2015
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

President Begaye Speaks at NIHB 32nd Annual Consumer Confab



Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye addressed the attendees of the National Indian Health Board 32nd Annual Consumer Conference on Sept. 22. He said the Navajo Nation is ready to work with other tribes and agencies to combat the suicide epidemic. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

WASHINGTON, D.C.— This week, Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye and Vice President Jonathan Nez attended the National Indian Health Board 32nd Annual Consumer Conference and spoke on issues important to the Navajo Nation.

In particular, they took the opportunity to advance the need for suicide prevention awareness on tribal nations, especially on the Navajo Nation. Based on the 2006 to 2009 Navajo Nation Mortality Report, the suicide rate is 17.48 persons per 100,000.

There is an average of 29 suicides per year. The Navajo Nation Epidemiology Center is working on implementation of a suicide surveillance system to address the issue. Most recently, an interdisciplinary team for suicide prevention, response and postvention was established.

The mission of NIHB is to provide one voice affirming and empowering American Indian and Alaska Native Peoples to protect and improve health and reduce health disparities.

Various tribal leaders from

Indian Country united to speak on issues ranging from suicide, drug addiction, alcoholism, domestic violence, post-traumatic stress syndrome and other social maladies afflicting American Indians.

On Sept. 20, Vice President Nez attended the board meeting and magnified the need for suicide awareness, especially after suicides in Montezuma Creek gripped the Navajo Nation recently.

“This suicide epidemic isn’t just on Navajo, it’s across Indian Country,” he said. “We had four suicides in an area

affected by the Gold King Mine spill.

“The San Juan River is a vital lifeline to the Navajo people and we do not know if the water contamination was responsible for them taking their lives, our young people,” he added.

Robert McSwain, director of Indian Health Services, provided an update on the budget and possible government shutdown. He spoke at length about the IHS FY 2016 reprogramming of funds, in particular, the use of \$1.8 million to purchase

modular buildings for Rapid City Indian Hospital to establish outpatient therapy for at-risk individuals. In the past six months, Pine Ridge Reservation had 19 suicides.

The current federal budget discussions are another major concern, he said.

“IHS has gone into preparation mode. We’ve made numerous calls to tribal leadership and programs across the country because we wanted people to understand the mechanics of a possible shutdown,” said McSwain.

IHS discussions on the 2018 budget are set to begin in November and McSwain said his staff is reaching out to other federal agencies like the U.S. Department of Health and Urban Development, Department of Interior and Department of Education to assist with addressing the suicide issue throughout Indian Country.

On Sept. 21, President Begaye and Vice President Nez participated in the IHS listening session and spoke of the need to retain funding for Gallup Indian Medical Center and additional funding to address the suicide issue on Navajo.

“We would like to be considered for the suicide funds from the White House and their emphasis on Generation Indigenous. We had four suicides in the last few weeks and I know the area where they occurred does not have facilities,” said President Begaye.

He added that Navajo is in need of a similar facility as the Rapid City modular building to address the mental health need on the Nation.

Vice President Nez said there is potentially a correlation between the four suicides and the Gold King Mine spill, especially since Montezuma Creek is located along the San Juan River.

He noted that IHS needs to fund a long-range study of the impacts from the spill, something like the Navajo Birth Cohort Study for uranium contamination.

“We need to have inter-agency, inter-department discussions on the epidemic of suicides in Indian Country,” he said.

On Sept. 22, President Begaye spoke to Native American youth during the 5th Annual Youth Film Festival. A number of Navajo youth were also in attendance to showcase their films.

“Stay true to who you are, follow your vision, your dreams,” said President Begaye.

The films were three to five minutes at length and focused on various health issues in tribal communities. More than 30 films were screened.

Vice President Nez addressed the NIHB members on Sept. 23 and said the intergenerational connection between elders and youth needs to be explored to end the suicide epidemic across the nation.

He touched on issues such as home healthcare services and emergency medical transport companies, often operated by non-Navajo organizations, proliferating throughout the Navajo Nation and the need for regulations.

“We really need to exercise our sovereignty as a nation and begin to promote more Navajo business owners on our tribal lands,” Vice President Nez said.

The conference ends on Sept. 24.



Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye encouraged the young native filmmakers to stay committed to themselves and follow the vision and dreams they set for themselves. Stay true to who you are, he said. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



Vice President Jonathan Nez was on the panel discussion group on Sept. 23 and thanked the staff and employees of Indian Health Services. It's not too often that people commend you on the services you provide, he said. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



Indian Health Services Director Robert McSwain facilitated a listening session with the National Indian Health Board. President Begaye brought up concerns about Gallup Indian Medical Center and suicide prevention. (Photo by Rick Abasta)