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Secretary of Health Robert F. Kennedy Jr. visits Navajo Nation

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — Against the backdrop of the iconic Window Rock arch, Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren sat on a sandstone cliff with U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Council Delegate Germaine Simonson to discuss critical healthcare access issues facing the Navajo people—and the solutions rooted in sovereignty, tradition, and self-reliance.

Secretary Kennedy, on a national tour, made a significant stop on the Navajo Nation to meet with tribal leaders including President Nygren, First Lady Jasmine Blackwater-Nygren, Speaker Crystalyne Curley, members of the 25th Navajo Nation Council, and officials from the Navajo Department of Health. The purpose of the visit was to better understand how Navajo programs are maximizing federal resources to serve thousands of Navajo people across the Nation.

"I know that you're no stranger to Navajo," President Nygren told Secretary Kennedy. "With your support and help, we will build the Gallup Indian Medical Center because it is in such, such need. It will expand to where we do not have to go to Albuquerque or Phoenix and our people will have a world-class facility."



The visit was deeply personal for Secretary Kennedy, who last set foot on the Navajo Nation 60 years ago alongside his father. His return began with a sunrise hike with tribal leaders from the base of the tribal capital

to Window Rock. They were met with sacred prayer, traditional songs by a medicine healer, and ceremonial dances performed by the Dinétah Dancers at the Navajo Veterans Memorial Park.

President Nygren provided additional context about the urgent health disparities on the Nation and the strain caused by the Indian Health Service's 30 percent vacancy rate.

"As President, I want to emphasize the importance of protecting and maintaining tribal sovereignty among food and healthcare for the Navajo Nation," President Nygren said.

Secretary Kennedy expressed strong support, making a clear commitment to address staffing shortages and cuts in the Indian Health Service.

"By lifting the IHS hiring freeze and rescinding the hundreds of employee terminations," Secretary Kennedy said, "it will not happen."

Secretary Kennedy emphasized that the federal government must go further to empower Native communities.

"Today we learned many things that HHS could be doing to improve the condition of Navajo health..." he said, adding that securing water will allow the Navajo people to build homes and become self-sustaining again.

A focal point of Secretary Kennedy's visit was the Navajo Nation's pioneering of the junk food tax, formally known as the Healthy Diné Nation Act. Passed in 2014 through grassroots mobilization by the Diné Community Advocacy Alliance, the law promotes healthy lifestyles and combats rising rates of diabetes and obesity.

The Indian Health Service reports that one in five Navajo Nation residents lives with diabetes, and approximately 75,000 individuals are prediabetic.

Revenues from the junk food tax have been redirected to support community wellness projects through the Navajo Division of Community Development, according to the Office of the Navajo Tax Commission.

President Nygren also emphasized the need for formal tribal consultations to ensure that the trust and treaty responsibilities are upheld, especially as recent changes at the federal level have impacted social services.

"We strive to live for 102 years as Navajo people, and also with your help and assistance, we look forward to reestablishing and protecting some of the services that your department provides," President Nygren told Secretary Kennedy.

In his closing remarks, President Nygren urged Kennedy to continue his advocacy—not just for the Navajo people, but for all of Indian Country: "The Navajo Nation is ready to lead—not only in promoting healthier lifestyles and wellness but in shaping a future that honors our sovereignty, strengthens our economy, and secures our place in the global supply chain."

President Nygren added, "Secretary Kennedy's visit today shows that our voices are being heard at the highest levels. We're not asking for charity, we're reaffirming equity, and we're building solutions grounded in sovereignty and self-reliance. From staffing our clinics to constructing the new Gallup Indian Medical Center, the Navajo Nation is ready to lead."

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