



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Navajo Nation looks to implement FirstNet network to help first responders and Navajo communities



PHOTO: Council Delegate Walter Phelps with officials from the Navajo Nation Telecommunications Regulatory Commission and FirstNet at Leupp fire station on April 6, 2016.

BLACK FALLS, Ariz. – Council Delegate Walter Phelps (Cameron, Coalmine Canyon, Leupp, Tolani Lake, Tsidi To) led state and federal officials on a tour of communities in the Western Navajo Agency on April 6, to provide a firsthand perspective of remote areas that lack telecommunication infrastructure which often leads to delayed response time for police officers, firefighters, and paramedics when an emergency occurs.

The officials along with acting director of the Navajo Nation Telecommunications Regulatory Commission, Teresa Hopkins, visited the home of Eleanor Peshlakai – a long time resident of Black Falls, located approximately 27 miles northwest of the small community of Leupp.

Peshlakai shared stories of three separate incidents in which local residents had to wait hours for first responders to arrive due to delayed communication and the rough terrain that many contend with on a daily basis. She also shared her personal story of a time when she collapsed in her home

at approximately 9:00 a.m. Peshlakai had to wait several hours on the floor of her home for first responders to arrive and finally reached the nearest emergency room close to midnight.

In addition, in 2013 it was reported that a Black Falls resident died in a car accident on a long stretch of dirt road between Leupp and Black Falls. Emergency personnel were not able to reach the victim immediately because of confusion over which emergency personnel was obligated to respond to the accident due to service areas not being clearly defined in this remote area, Delegate Phelps explained.

The incident prompted Delegate Phelps to sponsor legislation in 2013, to authorize the Navajo Nation Telecommunications Regulatory Commission to implement and manage a 911 emergency response system within the Navajo Nation.

The group also presented to community members at a Tolani Lake Chapter meeting and toured a fire station in Leupp that operates with one fire truck and three volunteer firefighters.

The tour provided the officials the opportunity to have an open dialogue regarding the implementation of FirstNet – the first nationwide, high-speed, broadband network dedicated to public safety, which was established through the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act passed by Congress in 2012.

FirstNet National Tribal Government Liaison Adam Geisler, said a working group has been created to coordinate directly with tribes to begin addressing the unique status and challenges that tribes may encounter such as tribal sovereignty, lack of infrastructure, and jurisdictional boundaries.

Prior to the tour, the officials also met with Speaker LoRenzo Bates (Nenahnezad, Newcomb, San Juan, Tiis Tsoh Sikaad, Tse'Daa'Kaan, Upper Fruitland) and Navajo Nation Vice President Jonathan Nez to provide an overview of the federally mandated program that is designed to provide a reliable broadband network separate from commercial networks.

Geisler said that when thousands of people converge at a special event, such as the Navajo Nation Fair, commercial networks become overloaded and interferes with emergency phone calls and communication between first responders and dispatchers. FirstNet will provide an independent network that will not be subjected to such interference, according to Geisler.

Officials also indicated that a key component to implementing the network would require data sharing with the Navajo Nation Division of Public Safety.

Speaker Bates noted that the implementation of a 911 system remains a top priority for the Council's Law and Order Committee and will require coordination and regular meetings between all entities to implement the system and the FirstNet network on the Navajo Nation.

FirstNet officials continue to consult with tribes and all 50 states to implement the network nationwide. For more information, please visit <http://www.firstnet.gov>.

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