



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Health, Education, and Human Services Committee receives update report on Hantavirus surveillance and prevention on the Navajo Nation

WINDOW ROCK – On Monday, the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee received an update report from the Navajo Nation Department of Health’s Navajo Epidemiology Center and their partners regarding the Hantavirus surveillance and prevention efforts currently taking place throughout Navajo land.

According to the Navajo Epidemiology Center’s executive director Ramona Antone-Nez, the objectives of the Hantavirus Five-Point Screening Report is to strengthen partnerships, conduct blood screening and testing training for IHS laboratory employees, implement screening protocols, conduct clinical presentations to providers, and meet with the Navajo Nation Council to establish a best practices policy.

The first confirmed cases occurred during a Hantavirus outbreak in 1993 in the Four Corners area, which resulted in 32 deaths that were attributed to the spread of the virus through deer mice. The majority of the cases originated in the Eastern Navajo Agency, which continues to remain a problem area.

EHSC member Steven Begay (Coyote Canyon, Mexican Springs, Naschitti, Tohatchi, Bahastl’a’a’) expressed concern for the higher rates of Hantavirus in the eastern area and questioned if the Navajo Area Indian Health Service and New Mexico Department of Health are involved with providing support, assistance, and public education regarding the virus.

“I would like to know where Navajo IHS is on this collaboration in trying to address this local concern. It’s not a national concern, but it is a concern with high rates in our area. With that said, where is the NMDOH for the New Mexico side? It seems like the numbers indicate that there are higher cases coming from the Eastern Navajo Agency, where there is a lack of infrastructure,” said Delegate Begay.

He stated that it was important to keep federal agencies accountable for health care concerns and public education when it comes to public health and outbreaks.

The Hantavirus Five-Point Screening for laboratory technicians is a tool for triage of suspected Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome that was developed by the University of New Mexico, and has been implemented at two health care facilities on the Navajo Nation. The training for the screening is sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Navajo Epidemiology Center.

HEHSC member Council Delegate Nathaniel Brown (Chilchinbeto, Dennehotso, Kayenta) said that it was important for health care facilities to carry out blood testing and training for Hantavirus on the Navajo Nation, and recommended a directive for 638-program health facilities to require the testing and training for laboratory technicians.

“Some of us have been impacted through family or people we know by hantavirus, so we understand the seriousness of it. Although it is not prevalent now, it’s still about prevention. I commend the Navajo Epidemiology Center for this information and using it to protect our people in that way. Many people don’t know what our epidemiologists do to monitor these diseases, and I want to thank you for doing a good job,” said Delegate Brown.

Delegate Brown said he was concerned for the high rates of Hantavirus in the Eastern Navajo Agency and proposed a directive to have the trainings for screening of the disease be provided to all health care facilities on the Navajo Nation and to provide an update report in three months.

HEHSC members voted 3-0 to approve the directive.

“I would like you all to come back with a report on who complied and trained their lab technicians at their hospitals. Hopefully most of them are getting this education. Thus far I am only hearing that Tséhootsoóí Medical Center has taken this training. I hope all of the Navajo Nation gets this education, because they need it, especially in our satellite communities of Tohájiilee, Alamo, and Ramah,” said Delegate Brown.

HEHSC members voted 3-0 to approve the report with one directive.

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