



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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23rd Navajo Nation Council approves the establishment of a Department of Medical Examiners

WINDOW ROCK – During the second and final day of a special session on Thursday, the 23rd Navajo Nation Council approved Legislation No. 0321-18, which will establish a department of medical examiners within the Navajo Nation Division of Public Safety if the resolution is signed into law. In addition, the bill authorizes the Council’s Law and Order Committee to consider and approve a plan of operation for the new department.

Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay, Jr. (Low Mountain, Many Farms, Nazlini, Tachee/Blue Gap, Tselani/Cottonwood), who is a member of the Law and Order Committee, which serves as the oversight authority for the Division of Public Safety.

In May, the Law and Order Committee received a report from Navajo Nation Department of Criminal Investigation director Dale West, who stated that the Department of Criminal Investigation has dual duties and responsibilities inclusive of conducting major crime investigations and non-criminal medical coroner duties that include completing state death certificates.

Law and Order Committee chair Council Delegate Edmund Yazzie (Churchrock, Iyanbito, Mariano Lake, Pinedale, Smith Lake, Thoreau) said that there is no other criminal investigation department in the country that conducts both criminal and non-criminal investigations.

The legislation states that the new department shall investigate all deaths occurring under suspicious circumstances, including violent and unexplained deaths, and is authorized to make determinations and issue certificates of death. Additionally, the department is authorized to respond to the scene of a death and prescribe procedures for taking possession of a dead body following the death that is subject to investigation.

All medicolegal investigations must be conducted in a manner that respects the culture, traditions, and beliefs of the Navajo Nation, according to the legislation. The legislation also outlines new provisions with the Criminal Code for the exhumations of death investigations and maintaining records and reports related to death investigations.

The Navajo Nation Council approved the bill on Thursday with a vote of 14-0. The President will have 10 calendar days to consider the resolution once it is delivered to the Office of the President and Vice President.

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