



Health, Education, and Human Services Committee continues addressing family and domestic violence shelter payment issues

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: June 28, 2020

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — Members of the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee (HEHSC) continued discussions with the Navajo Nation Division of Social Services (DSS) regarding family and domestic violence shelter contracts on Wednesday, Jun. 24, via teleconference. The oversight session was one of multiple meetings called by the committee with DSS and stakeholders to work through non-payment of contracts and the process whereby DSS made the initial awards.

Issues with payments to family and domestic violence shelter organizations under contract with DSS for federal Family Violence Prevention and Services Act (FVSPA) funding were brought to HEHSC's attention in April of this year. Since then, the committee has held leadership meetings and work sessions to address the hold-up in critical payments to shelters, especially during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Brenda Tsosie, principal accountant for the financial management section of the DSS, reported again that the total amount of money provided to the shelters from FVSPA was \$1,827,000. Of that amount, 70 percent of funds were distributed to direct services and 30 percent to support administrative operations. DSS maintained that a former program manager's correspondence with the shelters did not establish not valid contracts.

The shelters have tried to receive reimbursements from the Navajo Nation under contracts with terms beginning Oct. 1, 2019. However, DSS is currently only honoring newer contracts with terms that started Jun. 1, 2020.

DSS stated in their report to HEHSC that seven shelters, Ama doo Atchini Bighan Inc. (ADABI), Northland Health Center, Navajo United Methodist, Alice's Place, Roberta's Place, Tohdenasshai Committee Against Family Abuse and Family Crisis Services, were recently asked to submit their individual insurance verifications. The documents are required of vendors by the Navajo Nation to ensure services and facilities have adequate coverage for incidents involving members of the public. DSS reported only three of the seven documents were received and approved after several rounds of review.

The committee, DSS and the shelters held a further discussion about the services that are provided by the shelters, including the intake process to receive those services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Regina Yazzie, program manager of Navajo Children and Family Services, explained that when domestic violence victims are taken in, they are given the option to file a police report. They are usually assessed, assigned a caseworker, and referred to mental health and other services, if necessary.

Delegates also sought specific recommendations and approaches regarding ways to break cycles of violence between batterers and victims. Council Delegate Eugene Tso (Chinle) asked how victims are being protected so that they do not reenter dangerous situations.

Representatives from both DSS and the shelters explained that there are many reasons why people return to abusive households, including for economic reasons, fear of retaliation from abusers and generational trauma.

Emily Ellison, executive director of Battered Family Services, stated that her organization is frustrated with the situation. They exhaust time and energy responding to basic administrative issues presented to them by the Navajo Nation government.

Although Yazzie stated that Battered Family Services did not receive an award letter because they did not turn in a proposal in time, Ellison asserted that her organization was not given the appropriate amount of time to submit a proposal under the new award and did not feel that DSS was working in good faith.

Members of HEHSC also discussed the approach of allowing the backdating of some documents to Oct. 1, 2019, to alleviate some of the current funding complications. Tsosie said that she would seek out legal recommendations from the Navajo Nation Department of Justice regarding this matter.

Ron Haven, who serves HEHSC as legal counsel, asked DSS representatives when the award notices were sent out and if the insurance limits were increased and when. Tsosie responded saying that the seven shelters received unofficial award letters in 2019 under the previous program manager. Delegates noted that DSS continued to provide inadequate answers to the committee's questions.

Council Delegate Daniel Tso (Littlewater, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake, Baca/Brewitt, Casamero Lake, Ojo Encino, Counselor), chairman of HEHSC, expressed his view that a main issue is the lack of clarity regarding who determines what documents are official or not.

"There is the appearance of two different value systems that the division is requiring, and for me, that's a very big concern," Chairman Tso said. He asked how DSS can correct these issues.

Council Delegate Carl R. Slater (Lukachukai, Rock Point, Round Rock, Tsaile/Wheatfields and Tsé Ch'izhi), vice chairman of HEHSC, further stated that there has not been an adequate response from DSS to the issues at hand and questioned how the committee could go further to receive proper responses. Concern persisted regarding the issue of backdating documents.

Chairman Tso concluded with a request for reports directly from the shelters regarding their operations and services provided.

The report from DSS was not accepted by HEHSC after a vote of 0 in favor and 4 opposed.

The Navajo Nation Division of Social Services is situated within the Executive Branch of the Navajo Nation government and is responsible for maintaining programs and services that address the social welfare of the Navajo People.

The Health, Education, and Human Services Committee (HEHSC) of the 24th Navajo Nation Council is the legislative oversight of the Division of Social Services. The committee is chaired by Council Delegate Daniel E. Tso and vice chaired by Council Delegate Carl R. Slater. Council Delegates Paul Begay (Coppermine, K'aibii'to, LeChee, Tonalea/Red Lake, Bodaway/Gap), Pernell Halona (Coyote Canyon, Mexican Springs, Naschitti, Tohatchi, Bahastl'a'a'), Charlaine Tso (Mexican Water, To'likan, Teenospos, Aneth, Red Mesa) and Edison J. Wauneka (Oaksprings, St. Michaels) are members.

###

MEDIA CONTACTS: nnlb.communications@gmail.com, (928) 287-2085

Byron C. Shorty, INT Communications Director

Timothy E. Benally, Public Information Officer

Isabella S. Robbins, Staff Writer