



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Health, Education, and Human Services Committee receives report on suicide surveillance and prevention

WINDOW ROCK – On Monday, the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee received a report regarding a collaborative suicide prevention project involving the Navajo Nation Epidemiology Center, Navajo Nation Department of Behavioral Health Services, and the Northern Agency Crisis Response Alliance.

The Navajo Nation Epidemiology Center is currently in the midst of carrying out a SAMSHA Native Connections Grant project entitled “Building Communities of Hope.” The project aims to reduce the prevalence and incidence rates of suicidal behavior and substance use disorders on the Navajo Nation by primarily focusing on youth populations ranging in ages 10-24.

According to the report, the Native Connections Building Communities of Hope promotes self-esteem, culture, and resiliency. It is a leadership-initiated project developed to respond to the increase in suicides that occurred in 2015. The initiative created an interdisciplinary team whose primary focus is suicide prevention. The project period is from Sept. 2016 to Sept. 2021.

HEHSC member Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty (Beclabito, Cove, Gadi’i’áhi/To’Koi, Red Valley, Tooh Haltsooi, Toadlena/Two Grey Hills, Tsé ałnáoz’t’I’i) expressed her support for the project, however she raised concerns regarding a proposed memorandum of agreement with the Johns Hopkins Center for American Indian Health, which would manage all data collected from the suicide and surveillance project.

“I did have some concerns with Johns Hopkins. I understand they do work with the hospitals, but we want to build up our own Navajo Epi Center and we do want to have access to Navajo Nation data, and to stop working in silos. Especially when we are talking about critical and sensitive issues. I know sometimes programs are looking for tribal consultation or official documents, and if they need an MOA, then we can work on that,” said Delegate Crotty.

Delegate Crotty recommended that the project employ college interns from the local colleges on the Navajo Nation to get their research practice hours completed rather than relying on outside entities to collect and manage Navajo data.

HEHSC member Council Delegate Nathaniel Brown (Chilchinbeto, Dennehotso, Kayenta) informed the collaborative group that the committee stands behind their efforts and will provide recommendations to aid in maximizing the use of the grant funding.

“Can part of the SAMSHA dollars be used to hire more peer counselors? They are out there in the schools and communities, and function as the eyes and ears for youth with suicidal ideations,” said Delegate Brown. “I know the Building Communities of Hope initiative is something that students have been asking for, and I hope you are able to reach out to more schools on the Navajo Nation.”

Delegate Brown said he would be willing to sponsor a legislation to ensure all MOAs/MOUs are in place to encourage the progression of the project, and added that he looks forward to reviewing the amended standardized surveillance reporting forms.

In agreement, HEHSC member Council Delegate Steven Begay (Coyote Canyon, Mexican Springs, Naschitti, Tohatchi, Bahastl’a’a’) said the surveillance reporting should be sensitive to the information being collected from Navajo citizens and safeguarded at all costs.

“I really have some reservations about this, especially if the Navajo public know their personal information is being utilized in this fashion. In order for this type of information to be housed for whatever benefit is being sought, I want to make sure the Navajo people are informed of how the information is being taken, such as their sensitive situations, and that it will be safeguarded and strictly protected,” said Delegate Begay.

HEHSC members voted 3-0 to accept the report.

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