



Domestic violence shelters report sharp rise in Navajo-based crisis calls, detail unpaid Social Services contracts

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: April 29, 2020

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — A coalition of domestic violence shelters comprised of Battered Families Services, Inc., Amá dóó Ałchiní Bighan, Inc. (ADABI), Roberta's Place Inc. and the Tohdinasshai Committee Against Family Abuse with support from the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women reported a sharp increase in crisis calls relating to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic on the Navajo Nation. The group delivered a report to the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee of the 24th Navajo Nation Council on Tuesday that included testimony that none of the shelters have received payments from the Navajo Nation Division of Social Services, which administers federal funding for crisis services to non-governmental grantees.

Battered Families Services, Inc. Executive Director Emily Ellison said the Gallup, N.M.-based shelter was established in 1981 and is led by a volunteer board of directors. Since the beginning of the Navajo Nation COVID-19 state of emergency, shelters have been classified as essential businesses that are allowed to stay open to serve members of the public, stated Ellison.

Ellison explained that each program in the coalition are sub-recipients of Navajo Nation contracts awarded by the federal government. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, the shelters and services are experiencing financial difficulties impacting the services they can deliver.

"The larger issue is the contracting process," said Ellison. "We've worked in full-faith with the Navajo Nation Division of Social Services, yet the process over the years has not improved."

The shelters described frequent changes in program managers, late releases for requests for proposals (RFPs), changes in the budget process, lack of discussion on program requirements and lack of notification on budget reductions. Ellison also recommended a review by the Navajo Nation of the internal 164 accountability process and a transition to an electronic system that can facilitate the tracking of required records.

"When I started working with Battered Families, we started invoicing the Navajo Nation in October. We did not receive payment until June of the following year. It's a lifeline," said Ellison. She stated that payment for invoices within 30 days is reasonable, 60 days is 'doable' and 90 days is difficult. But, 6 months strains their finances.

"We understand this process is supposed to be seamless if a program properly carries out the process," said Ellison. "We really encourage the Navajo Nation to develop a system of accountability."

ADABI Executive Director Lorena Halwood stated, "I have been working here at ADABI for 23 years. In those 23 years, the Division of Social Services, as well as the Navajo Nation, has never improved or changed the process of how the grants go to the Navajo Nation and come through to ADABI."

The federal funding is critical to the operations and basic services provided by the shelter, Halwood said. "We're here helping victims and children and these are our moms, our aunts, our sisters, our relatives, our uncles."

Halwood continued to shed light on the circumstances that have led to an increase in domestic

violence calls received by all shelters. Halwood stated, "With this pandemic, we have loss of jobs, which is a major financial setback for families. I would call it intimate terrorism, now, in the homes of victims."

With the confinement of Navajo people and the overall decrease of living space, Halwood shared, the rates of domestic abuse and domestic violence are increasing in Navajo households. "Can you imagine a victim being in there with a batterer 24-7? Being isolated with a batterer? I think that it gives more power to the abuser."

ADABI and other shelters surrounding the Navajo Nation continue to provide services to Navajo victims, despite the ongoing lack of communication from the Division of Social Services regarding funding awards. She stated that the shelter received an award letter on Aug. 21, 2019. "In four months, it's going to be a year since we received our award letter and the funding has still not come through," said Halwood. "Four times a week, we call and say, 'What's going on with the contracts? Where are the contracts at?' We're literally running on fumes at the shelter."

"We are pleading with the Council, our leaders, to assist us. How can this change?" Halwood said.

Jessica Cooper, representing Roberta's Place in Grants, N.M., reported next on the way the grant funding was historically processed. "Typically, the RFP doesn't get released until after the beginning of the fiscal year and we have about a month to work on the RFP."

If the proposal submitted by the shelter is approved by the Division of Social Services, Cooper stated, the money typically does not get released until after February. The shelters are still required to abide by the contract's scope of work through the date the money is dispersed.

"Domestic violence, locally, is absolutely increasing with being sheltered-in-place with their abusers," said Cooper. "Shelter staff are seeing a huge increase in crisis calls and the need for the ability to have a place to go. With COVID-19, it's very difficult."

Cooper said that this year, the RFP process was issued on Jul. 23, 2019 and was due within 13 days. The RFP and contract language was changed to disallow shelters from billing other funders for similar services. Cooper and other shelter directors appealed the contract language with recommendations only to receive no response from the division. She said that, recently, she was contacted to sign the scope of work in the contract, but in reviewing the language, it was the same contract that was appealed.

"How can we move forward and still access this money for our programs? I would say at least 60 percent of my clientele comes from the reservation and that money is crucial for keeping services going," said Cooper.

Tohdinasshai Committee Against Family Abuse Shelter Director Carmelia Blackwater similarly stated their program received an award letter on Aug. 13, 2019. "We don't know what the status of the contract is."

Blackwater said they've been told by the Division of Social Services that, in the course of working to get the funding contract together, federal funding has not been awarded. "May, June, that's when we finally start getting funding."

Since the shelter is awarded federal Family Violence Prevention and Services Act (FVPSA) funding, the Kayenta-based shelter does not discriminate against victims that seek its services. They serve all members of the public, said Blackwater, though the vast majority of their clients are Navajo.

"The money that comes in is what we use to pay our bills and to pay our employees. If the monies aren't coming in for three months, four months, we can't pay our bills, we can't pay our employees, it gets very difficult to run the services we need," said Blackwater.

Blackwater stated that Arizona awards grants in three year blocks. "If the Navajo Nation can award in three-year blocks, we don't have to complain about it every year. There's got to be some changes, soon."

“The pandemic is really impacting the services that we’re trying to provide to victims of violence, and they’re the victims that are being forgotten,” said Blackwater. “We’re trying to pick up the services that the Navajo Nation doesn’t have.”

Ellison concluded the report with an overview of the various services provided by the shelters in the coalition. These services include crisis intervention, safety planning, transportation, shelter operations, referrals to community-based services, housing application assistance, employment application assistance, temporary restraining order filing assistance, life skills coordination, parenting classes, therapy sessions, budgeting classes, and more.

“We’re always trying to think outside the box to assist these individuals,” said Ellison. “We’re grateful for the financial support we get from the Navajo Nation, but there has to be a better system.”

Following the report, Council Delegate Paul Begay acknowledged that Ellison previously extended an invitation to members of HEHSC to tour the Battered Families shelter in Gallup. He said the Committee has carried out its oversight function effectively by conducting field and facility visits at schools, health facilities, veterans services and other sites. “I think we started off very well,” said Delegate Begay. “We did it by visiting on-site.”

That changed, noted Delegate Begay, once the COVID-19 pandemic began spreading throughout the country and the southwest region. “We learn a lot when we visit them on location,” he said. Though they cannot undergo a field visit, Delegate Begay noted that shelters continue to carry out good work with the support they provide to the Navajo People.

“It sounds like Chinle nursing home, how they really went through a lot,” said Council Delegate Edison Wauneka. “They’re finally getting relief due to the concerns of Council.” He asked Blackwater to describe the three-year block funding system used by the state.

Blackwater said the shelter’s 2018 three-year block award comes from the Arizona Department of Health Services. She explained the department had a similar problem with their grants as the Navajo Nation. It was one of the program managers at the state level who said it was implemented to lessen the administrative burden of awarding every year. Blackwater concluded by stating she extended an invitation to AZDHS program managers to detail the process to the Navajo Nation.

“That was a concern,” said Delegate Wauneka. “It seems, at this time, you really need funding, especially with what’s going on with the virus.”

Delegate Wauneka pointed out that the issues the Dr. Guy Gorman, Sr. Care Home in Chinle, AZ reported earlier last week to the Council are similar to those reported by the shelters. Those issues include the Division of Social Services’ lack of communication and timely handling of contracts to vendors, like the care home and the shelters.

“It seems like it can be corrected immediately because the president’s office has direct authority to these divisions. Sometimes I wonder why certain programs have to go through what you guys are going through,” said Delegate Wauneka.

With various federal COVID-19 response funds allocated to the Navajo Nation over the past month, Delegate Wauneka added that the Committee can recommend the funding to these programs be immediately distributed to the programs.

Halwood added to Blackwater’s response by detailing the internal review process a contract goes through to receive funding. FVPSA funding reaches the shelters as a pass-through grant facilitated by the Navajo Nation. “Once social services receives it, it goes to DOJ, it goes to OMB, it goes to OOC, then it goes to the president’s office. And we ask, ‘Where’s our contract?’” She described a runaround between the different offices to locate their contract.

“It’s been at the president’s office for the last two months,” said Halwood. “It sits on somebody’s desk for a month or two.”

She continued by stating, “The funding is supposed to start on October 1st. Last year, we got our first check on April 24th, and we have just a few months to spend it.” Halwood said that delays result in pressure to quickly expend budgets by performing emergency hires or buying supplies by the bulk.

In other times, shelters need funding for food and gas money when transporting between the Chinle shelter and the Kayenta or Shiprock shelters. Halwood said shelters also transport victims to the Federal Bureau of Investigations office in Flagstaff, AZ, which results in return trips lasting beyond 9:00 PM.

HEHSC Vice Chair Carl Slater acknowledged a consistent set of concerns heard by the Committee regarding the Division of Social Services. “It’s one thing to legislate and another to get people to follow through on their obligations to the process,” he said.

In addition to thanking each of the directors, Vice Chair Slater said the recommendations provided by the presenters will be very helpful in making the Navajo Nation’s contracts and grants processing system work for more people. “With our peoples’ lives at stake, there shouldn’t be anything against us in trying to improve our people’s lives,” said Vice Chair Slater.

In preparation for a special meeting the next day with the Division of Social Services, Chairman Tso requested of the presenters a one-page report detailing award letter dates, contract amount and the type, cost reimbursement or a straight grant. The data provided by the shelters on the increase in reports of violence and domestic abuse will help guide policy decisions regarding the Division of Social Services and the Navajo Nation’s internal system of accountability.

“It’s almost a systematic failure, the system is failing the folks that are eligible for the funding that are applying for funding. Yes, the system has to be changed, and how can this committee affect that change that can better serve the Navajo People,” Chairman Tso said.

In response to a question from Council Delegate Pernell Halona, Chairman Tso described a part of the discussion from the Chinle care home meeting regarding the transition from a yearly grant to a five-year grant for elderly care services. From that discussion, Chairman Tso said the decision to make the change is with the Division of Social Services with input from the Office of the Controller.

Ellison reiterated that the Navajo Nation needs to review and overhaul the 164 review process and transition to an electronic filing system. “At this point in time, it seems like the funding payment process goes between 25 to 30 different steps,” she said.

Angel Charley, executive director for the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women closed by stating that the Navajo Nation’s own tribally-run shelters conduct many referrals to the providers located around the Navajo Nation and to other parts of the state. In her work, Charley shared that facilities all over the region often see tribal members at a rate of 75 percent of their total clientele on average.

Chairman Tso requested information from the Division of Social Services representative on the status of the grants and contracts to be presented during the special meeting of HEHSC on Apr. 29, 2020.

HEHSC voted to accept the report by a vote of 4 in favor and 1 opposed with Chair not voting.

“The pandemic has many effects, and that’s very concerning. Grandmothers, most notably our children, they need care, they need support. Thank you, just know that with the Committee’s vote, we are in full support,” said Chairman Tso.

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