



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Health, Education, and Human Services Committee receives reports regarding advocacy of dental therapy; school farming on the Navajo Nation

TUBA CITY, Ariz. – On Monday, the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee received two separate reports, in which the first requests support at the state level for dental therapy services on the Navajo Nation and to provide recommendations to committee members. The second report is in regards to the advocacy of implementing “Farm To School” programs within schools on Navajo land.

Executive director of the Arizona Advisory Council on Indian Health Care, Kim Russell, reported that the organization has submitted a “sunrise” proposal to the Arizona State Legislature that seeks to establish new licensure and scope of practice for dental therapists in Arizona, and requested the assistance of the HEHSC members to begin pushing the initiative forward at the state level.

Russell said under general supervision of a licensed dentist, a dental therapist is a mid-level provider that is comparable to a nurse practitioner, who is able to provide some dental care that a dentist would normally perform, such as routine preventative and restorative care including filling cavities, inserting temporary crowns, and extracting diseased teeth—all at a lower cost.

The report also stated that implementing dental therapy, especially on the Navajo Nation, would have beneficial factors such as addressing the significant need in dental care service shortages, the ability for providers to practice on tribal and non-tribal lands, and encourage Navajo people to become dental therapists through the two-year certification program.

In support of implementing dental therapy on the Nation, HEHSC vice chair Council Delegate Norman M. Begay (Alamo, Ramah, Tóhajiilee) said the AACOIHC would need to include the assurance that providers will deliver the best avenue of care for all Navajo dental patients, rather than resume questionable practices Navajo citizens experience at Indian Health Service facilities.

“When you go to any IHS, to save the costs, they can just pull your tooth without any explanation. It is a short cut of trying to solve the problem and it’s not necessary,” said Delegate Begay. “There are teeth that can be saved with a root canal, but they elect to just pull teeth. It’s not right.”

Delegate Begay added that public education of oral hygiene throughout the Navajo Nation, especially in schools, is very important to ensure Navajo citizens are able to avoid undesirable consequences and to understand their dental care options that best fit their needs.

HEHSC chair Council Delegate Jonathan Hale (Oak Springs, St. Michaels) invited the AACOIHC to participate in the Council's State Task Force's upcoming meeting to inform the members of the sunrise application and to begin advocating to state legislators regarding the proposal.

HEHSC members voted 3-0 to accept the report.

The second report, provided by the COPE Project/REACH Program Partners in Health, sought recommendations from committee members to draft legislation that would create policies to implement "Farm To School" programs on the Navajo Nation.

According to the report, research by Harvard Law School students from the Food and Law Policy Clinic, identified four main policy areas that would aid in developing the school farming programs: community empowerment, sustainable food production, food access and obesity prevention, and reducing food waste.

The COPE Project/REACH Program Partners in Health collaborated with the law students with the goal of encouraging students to learn traditional knowledge, farming, and nutrition, as well as utilizing the produce from the school farms to feed students to inspire healthier eating habits and to lower food costs for the schools.

HEHSC member Council Delegate Nathaniel Brown (Chilchinbeto, Dennehotso, Kayenta) said with the high rates of diabetes and little access to healthy foods, he believes the initiative would be successful in promoting healthy and Navajo traditional living.

"We can start working on this at the chapter level because this is where a lot of the legislative process starts. So we need to talk to our chapters, talk to our agency councils, and eventually the Navajo Nation Council, and have this tremendous support behind us and to really educate our people on what this is all about," said Delegate Brown.

Delegate Brown suggested that a work session take place between committee members, COPE/REACH programs, the Department of Diné Education, and the Navajo Nation Board of Education, to begin developing a food policy for Navajo schools. He added that they would also need to work with private and charter schools within the Navajo Nation.

HEHSC members voted 3-0 to accept the report.

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