



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Health, Education, and Human Services Committee receives report regarding concerns about the NAAA program

WINDOW ROCK – The Health, Education, and Human Services Committee received an update report from the New Mexico Navajo Area Agency on Aging regarding the status on current capitol improvement projects, personnel shortfalls, food contracts, and funding issues for the program’s FY2017 budget.

Lucinda Martin, NAAA administrator, provided the HEHSC members with a written report regarding key issues that may affect the efficiency of direct services to Navajo elderly, such as a personnel shortage. Martin said the HEHSC and Budget and Finance Committee gave the program a directive to increase direct services and activities for elders.

Martin informed HEHSC members that in the FY2017 budget there were no employee layoffs, however, staff hours were reduced to 72 hours per pay period for senior center supervisors, cooks, and drivers for the Chinle, Crownpoint, Fort Defiance, Shiprock, and Tuba City areas. She added that the staff would most likely not have their lunch hour until around 3:00 p.m. on a regular work day due to food delivery, assisting elders at lunch, and cooking.

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’l’í) raised concerns regarding critical positions that were excluded from the executive branch budget, which included five caseworkers and five activity coordinators for the NAAA program.

“If one of the executive administration’s pillars is elders, one of their four, my expectation and the [Navajo] people’s expectation is that we are going to see a huge investment in elder related activities within the NAAA program,” said Delegate Crotty. “In terms of how you are letting our elders know how they are valued in the community is not being mirrored in the central office.”

Delegate Crotty added that the executive branch should begin to analyze how they can direct the divisions to give them the flexibility and the ability to identify their needs so it can be reported to the administration and allocate funding to the most needed areas.

HEHSC member Council Delegate Nathaniel Brown (Chilchinbeto, Dennehotso, Kayenta) expressed disappointment in the reduction of hours for NAAA employees and staff not being able to take a regular lunch break at noon.

“So you are telling the driver and the cook that they will not have a lunch hour? How many of us are willing to sacrifice and not eat? What kind of health condition risks are we putting on our [employees]? That could be seen as a human rights violation,” said Delegate Brown.

Delegate Brown added that these issues need to be communicated to the Navajo citizens by Office of the President and Vice President and Navajo Department of Health, because he has received several complaints from constituents who said that there is inadequate funding to staff senior centers which need to prioritize the health and well being of Navajo elderly.

Delegate Brown also questioned President Begaye’s reasoning to allow Navajo Nation Controller Jim R. Parris to collect a \$10,000 bonus each quarter of the fiscal year, and is permitted to work in Window Rock only three days a week and work the remaining work days at his home. He added that he has received several complaints from NNOOC staff.

“If we are going to cut our senior center staff’s hours and Parris gets a bonus and is allowed to work only three days a week in Window Rock, I want to know why this is being allowed,” said Delegate Brown. “I would like to make a directive to see Parris’s contract, because that money could have gone to the NAAA program staff whose hours were cut.”

HEHSC members voted 3-0 to approve the directive.

NNDOH acting director Ramona Antone-Nez said the budget allocation to the NNDOH for FY2017 was approximately \$11.5 million, in which about \$10.7 million was allocated to the NAAA program, or over 80-percent of the NNDOH budget.

Antone-Nez said that the issues facing the NAAA program are not only financial shortfalls, but the need to improve management of the senior centers in all areas, and to be able to discipline program managers and staff when direct services begin to suffer. She requested support from the Navajo Nation Council to make significant changes to the program.

“In order for that change to happen, I need support. Not just the financial support, I need support from the oversight [HEHSC] and the Council,” said Antone-Nez. “I can’t continue to have a conversation like this every month and every quarter.”

Antone-Nez said there would be a restructuring of the NNDOH, which includes all programs under the department, and invited HEHSC members to meet, discuss, and provide guidance on the proposed reorganization.

HEHSC vice chair Council Delegate Norman M. Begay (Alamo, Ramah, Tóhajiilee) said he supported Antone-Nez’s proposal to restructure the NNDOH programs so that it would increase accountability and direct services to Navajo citizens.

“I support you if you are going to shake up your department. It’s going to get nasty before it’s going to get better. It’s like a storm that comes in—it’s rough at first and then when it passes, things begin to grow,” said Delegate Begay.

HEHSC members voted 3-0 to accept the report with one directive.

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