



State of the Navajo Nation Address

Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and Vice President Myron Lizer
Presented to the 24th Navajo Nation Council
Winter Council Session – January 24, 2022

Yá'át'ééh to the Honorable Members of the 24th Navajo Nation Council, Speaker Seth Damon, Chief Justice JoAnn B. Jayne, as well as chapter, county, state, and federal leaders, and most importantly our Diné Citizens. On behalf of the Nez-Lizer Administration, we are pleased to present the State of the Navajo Nation Address for the 2022 Winter Council Session.

Together, we reflect on the unique connections with our Diné teachings and values during the winter, Hai, season. The change to cold weather allows us to reflect on our experiences and share our teachings with our children and families. Many of our homes are filled with winter stories and teachings of our ceremonies, emergence, existence, and resiliency. Our sacred winter stories and teachings continue to give us strength, guidance, and comfort, and most importantly, it gives us time to connect with one another through kinship, K'é.

We also want to recognize and thank everyone who participated in today's walk, led by Chair Amber Kanazbah Crotty, to raise awareness about human trafficking issues that impact our Navajo people. We appreciate the Council's support as we work together to focus on human trafficking and missing persons issues. Earlier this month, our Administration issued a proclamation recognizing the month of January as "Navajo Nation Human Trafficking Awareness Month," but we know that this is an issue that requires far more attention and coordination from all sides.

Now, with the recent surge in COVID-19 cases across the country and in border towns and regions near and around our Nation, we commend our frontline warriors for doing everything they can, for sacrificing time away

from their loved ones, and putting themselves at risk to help our people and to save lives. Despite the challenges, our Navajo people continue to push back on the virus.

Today, we have 72.5% of our people, 12 years and older, who are fully vaccinated for COVID-19 – one of the highest vaccination rates in the entire world. Of our elders who are 65 years and older, 87% are fully vaccinated. This shows that our elders continue to lead the way and set a great example for our people. Recently, we've experienced a large increase in COVID-19 cases. However, due to our high vaccination rates, the large majority of people being infected are only experiencing minimal symptoms and our health care facilities are maintaining despite incredible challenges. Thanks to the effectiveness of the vaccines, we are not experiencing a surge in hospitalizations and losses of life as in other areas off the Navajo Nation.

With the support of the 24th Navajo Nation Council and many others, our Nation is providing our people with a hand up in the midst of this COVID-19 surge through Hardship Assistance. As the Office of the Controller continues to work through the challenges to distribute the financial relief to our people as quickly as possible, we also have to devote more of our time and resources to move forward with allocating the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds for infrastructure development, housing, and other long-term improvements for our people.

We thank you, the 24th Navajo Nation Council, for your support of the ARPA Hardship Assistance. The Office of the Controller has received over 16,000 requests for changes of addresses, as of today, and they are working hard to get the relief to our people as quickly as possible. Together, we approved approximately one quarter of the \$2 billion in ARPA funds for direct financial relief for our people and we continue to urge them to use the funds for essential items and services to help mitigate this pandemic. We must also acknowledge and thank our Congressional delegation, federal agencies, and the Biden-Harris Administration for supporting tribal nations through the American Rescue Plan Act.

Now, we have to get the remaining funds allocated so we can move forward with the long-term improvements, the projects that will improve the quality of life for many of our people and for future generations. We need the Council to act quickly, by approving the infrastructure funding proposals in Legislation No. 0257-21. The Navajo Nation received the first allocation of

ARPA funds nearly 8 months ago and now the legislation is on hold for up to 60 days. If this pace continues, it might take one year before the funds are ready to be implemented. We have to move quicker to get these improvements started and completed within the federal timelines. Our Administration will continue to support its moratorium on supplemental spending until the remaining American Rescue Plan Act funds are allocated.

The Council and the Executive Branch have held multiple public meetings and work sessions. Our employees and technical experts have been meeting every day and working with IHS, enterprises, and other professionals to plan and prioritize projects for water, electricity, broadband, housing, and other necessities. The proposals contained in Legislation No. 0257-21 are prioritized based on the readiness of each project in terms of the completion of preliminary requirements and clearances, the availability of resources, and the federal timeline to expend the ARPA funds.

Each member of the Council has been provided a binder with information about each project included in the ARPA proposals. In addition, each of our lawmakers has received a supplemental report that outlines water projects that includes past and present funding sources including the Síhasin Fund, UUFB, Permanent Trust Fund interest, and IHS funds. We know there are questions and concerns about distribution equality among the five agencies, 24 legislative districts, and 110 chapters, but time is of the essence. The legislation is on hold for up to another 60 days based on the action taken last week. If leaders begin to remove projects that are construction ready and replace them with ones that are not, we will not only delay these improvements even more, but we will also make it much more difficult to meet the federal deadline to use the funds. Additionally, if more new projects are added, it will take more time for the Department of Justice to vet them to ensure compliance with Treasury guidelines.

With the CARES Act funds that we received in 2020, we worked with the Council and we successfully met the federal deadline and obligated the entire \$714 million allocation for hardship assistance and long-term improvements. Our Administration has been on the ground in communities such as Dilkon, Ganado, Kayenta, Tohatchi, Twin Lakes, Klagetoh, Greasewood, Tonalea/Red Lake, and other areas where families received electricity, water lines, water cistern systems, bathroom additions, and other life-changing

improvements. We know that it can be done successfully because we've worked together and got it done before.

Legislation No. 0257-21 proposed over 600 water and wastewater projects across the Navajo Nation. For broadband, funding will be used to provide middle-mile and last-mile connections for homes, schools, first responders, and others, as well as set-asides for rural addressing, E-911 system enhancements, and cyber security. The proposal also includes funding to electrify over 3,900 homes and approximately 800 solar unit systems.

For housing construction and renovations, funding will be provided for each of the 110 communities. We know that it is not nearly enough to address all housing needs, but we continue to look to NHA and other partners to assist with housing needs. Our administration is working on establishing regional housing manufacturing facilities to construct homes for our people. Housing is a top priority and we need to work together to do more.

The ARPA proposal also includes funding for bathroom additions. When we went out and met with chapter officials and community members last year, bathroom additions were near the top of the priority list for nearly all communities. With the CARES Act, the Division of Community Development worked with NTUA and NECA to complete bathroom additions for hundreds of homes, including many elders. DCD has over 4,000 residents requesting bathroom additions, which also includes supplemental house wiring, wastewater and septic installations, water, and the necessary power needed to provide fully functional bathrooms.

We have far too many families living without these basic necessities and we need to move on these proposals immediately. Our people can't afford to wait another 60 days for funding to be considered. We need to take bold action and help our people as quickly as possible.

In addition to the ARPA funds, our administration is working with IHS, federal departments and agencies, and the White House to leverage other funding sources and identify grants and other funding opportunities to supplement project funds that we currently have in place. For the first time, IHS is receiving adequate funding for SDS water projects to complete water infrastructure improvements that have been on a waiting list for many years. All of this is being carefully coordinated so that we can maximize benefits for our people and leverage all sources of funding.

One example is the work that we are doing with the National Telecommunications and Information Administration to secure more funding for broadband development. NTIA was allocated \$2 billion through the \$1.2 trillion Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. This is in addition to the \$980 million that was previously approved through the Consolidated Appropriations Act last year. Our administration submitted funding applications totaling \$55 million, which was the cap placed on each tribe, but we are working with NTIA to increase that cap now that the additional \$2 billion has been added.

Last year, our administration successfully secured \$53 million in funding through the Federal Communications Commission's E-Rate Program, to install over 600 miles of fiber optic lines that is being used to expand internet capacity on the Navajo Nation. The historic achievement took years of coordination and planning. Through the coordination and persistence of many partners, we resolved long standing issues that stemmed from a previous administration's dealings with the company, OnSat, which stood in the way of progress. The solutions we developed now allow the E-Rate Program to finally proceed. This same type of coordination and advocacy for broadband is taking place for water, electricity, and other infrastructure funding.

Aside from ARPA funding, we have many needs across our communities. Together, we approved another round of Hardship Assistance in the amount of \$2,000 for adults and \$600 per minor. This short-term assistance will help many Navajo families and provide them a hand up during this ongoing pandemic, but we also need to look at long-term solutions when it comes to helping Navajo students who are working hard to obtain their degrees and a better quality of life.

We know that far too many students are having to tap into student loans and when they graduate, they have to spend many years paying back that debt. This forces many of our people to hold off on building or purchasing a new home and achieving many other milestones in life, so they can afford to make monthly student loan payments.

During the last campaign season, when all of our current leaders were out seeking support, many of our people challenged all candidates to do more for our students by providing more scholarship opportunities. In 2019, our Administration worked with the Council and the Office of Navajo Nation

Scholarship and Financial Assistance to put forth an initiative to set aside \$50 million from the Síhasin Fund to invest in scholarship opportunities and to grow the amount of funds over time.

Legislation was introduced, but unfortunately, it did not gain approval from the Council. If it had been approved two years ago, our Nation would've had more funding to support more scholarship applications for current students. This was certainly a missed opportunity, but one that will be reconsidered soon.

Once the remaining American Rescue Plan Act funds are approved and allocated for infrastructure and other needs, legislation will be re-introduced to allocate \$50 million from the Síhasin Fund to invest in scholarship opportunities and we look for your support as it moves forward through the legislative process and hopefully to the Office of the President and Vice President for final approval. We have to do this together to help our students.

In terms of energy development, last week, we joined NTUA and SRPS to finalize a historic agreement that extends the operation of the existing Kayenta I solar facility through March 2038 and to allow for a new 200-megawatt solar facility known as "Cameron Solar" to be constructed by 2023. Chairman Rickie Nez and Council Delegate Nathaniel Brown were also in attendance.

At the start of our Administration, we established a new vision for energy development for the Navajo Nation with the signing of the Hayoolkaal proclamation, which prioritizes renewable energy initiatives and supports the transition from coal to other resources to help build our economy and make our Nation a key stakeholder in renewable energy across the country. With the partnership of SRP and NTUA, we are making a statement and taking another big step forward to building our Nation, this is about Nation building, and the future of our Navajo people.

With the closure of the Navajo Generating Station and the Kayenta Mine, the Navajo Nation lost \$30 to \$50 million in annual revenue. For many decades, these facilities provided cheap water and power to cities like Phoenix, Tucson, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas. These cities were built using Navajo water, coal, and our workforce. As coal-fired power plants like NGS

continue to shut down, it is our position that utility companies have an obligation to the coal-impacted communities, such as our Navajo Nation.

We are taking action to ensure that our communities can make a sound transition beyond the closure of these power plants and to make sure these utilities assist with the transition. Our Administration worked with the Arizona Public Service Company to establish a Coal Community Transition agreement that would provide \$100 million to the Navajo Nation over 10 years to help address the effects of the closure of APS-owned power plants on and near the Navajo Nation. Key aspects of the agreement required approval by the Arizona Corporation Commission. Unfortunately, the ACC scaled the amount back from \$100 million to \$10 million.

The ACC is currently seeking additional input on the Coal Community Transition issue through a General Docket. The Nation will continue to advocate for the remaining \$90 million and our position that the ACC must act justly and expediently in approving more Coal Community Transition funding for the Navajo Nation and other impacted communities. As we move forward on this issue, it's crucial that we as leaders present a united voice with the ACC and other stakeholders.

In addition, the Division of Economic Development worked with our Economic Recovery Work Group led by Vice President Lizer, as well as Council members and local leaders to finalize an agreement that allows ZenniHome to repurpose one of the facilities on the former NGS site to construct eco-friendly homes. This initiative has the potential to create over 100 new job opportunities for Navajo people and to stimulate the local economy.

In addition to the ARPA funding proposal for housing, the Navajo Veterans Administration will be completing the construction of the first home for a Navajo veteran in recent years. As many know, the Veterans Housing Program was created several years back, but there were many policy issues and challenges that had to be resolved. Now, we are finally seeing the progress that our veterans have demanded. More homes for more of our veterans will be built and we will be sure to provide additional updates along the way.

Recently, we swore in several new members of the Navajo Nation Veterans Advisory Council. The six new members include new Chair Tim Johnson,

new Vice Chair Elouise Brown, Secretary Elciena Baker, as well as Linda Onesalt, Gabriella Mehl, Gilbert Platero, and Olin Kieyoomia who previously served on the Advisory Council. They join returning members Billy Goodman, Jr., Vern Roy Lee, and Marie A. Zwierlein. We recognize them and congratulate all of the new and returning members.

In October, we met with U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs Stephanie Birdwell under the U.S. Department of Veterans, to request support for establishing a new federal Veterans Administration regional district that would be located on the Navajo Nation to provide service benefits closer to home and reduce the travel costs that many Navajo veterans incur commuting hundreds of miles to the nearest federal veterans offices in cities like Albuquerque, N.M. and Phoenix, Arizona.

With a population of over 10,000 Navajo veterans, we are proposing a Native American veterans center on the Navajo Nation to provide federal benefits including clinical and mental health services to help Native American veterans with PTSD and other health care issues. We are proposing to include a veteran's hospital and cancer treatment center as part of the new Gallup Indian Medical Center. In addition, we continue to urge the Department of Veterans Affairs to reinstate assistance for traditional healing that was previously offered through the Carl T. Hayden Traditional Healing Program.

We know more needs to be done to help veterans and all of our people who are dealing with mental health and substance use problems. Last month, we met with officials with Community Bridges, Inc. to continue developing a path forward to establish alcohol and substance abuse treatment centers on the Navajo Nation, to heal our people and provide these critical services closer to home.

Public safety is also a great concern in many communities. Through the constituency services department within the Office of the President and Vice President, we receive reports and concerns from elders and families over drug and alcohol use in their neighborhoods and we help to communicate and facilitate those issues with the Navajo Police Department. Under the leadership of our new Navajo Police Chief Daryl Noon and former Chief Phillip Francisco, the Navajo Police Department has re-implemented the gang and drug task force to help address these issues in our communities.

The Division of Public Safety has also worked to secure more resources to help with highway safety and new K-9's. We appreciate the Council working with the Executive Branch to develop solutions that give our animal control officers the authority and support to effectively mitigate dog attacks in our communities. With your support, we secured more funding in this year's budget to hire 10 more animal control officers and the Department of Fish and Wildlife continues to seek qualified applicants.

All of these issues are important and they impact many, if not all, of our Navajo people. It takes the Legislative and Executive Branches working together with local, state, and federal partners on many of these issues and to develop solutions. With state legislative sessions in progress, we have another opportunity to present united voices on many issues related to Capital Outlay funds in the state of New Mexico, data sharing and coordination on missing persons, protection of the Indian Child Welfare Act, infrastructure initiatives, and many other issues.

Recently, we had the opportunity to speak during a joint Senate and House session at the Arizona State Capitol on many critical issues. When it comes to voting rights, we have to contend with the reality that there is a lot of division and debate over the voting rights issues. As our state legislators proceed with their legislative sessions, we continue to urge them to think of the elders that live in rural areas of the Navajo Nation, who don't have immediate access to a post office, or voting polls on election day.

Many of our elders and those living in remote communities have to drive hundreds of miles and several hours to cast their ballot, and when they get to the voting polls, they have to contend with language barriers because many are fluent in the Navajo language only, but they do it because they value their right to vote, and no one should stand in their way. We need voting laws that uphold and protect all citizens' rights to vote, including Native Americans.

As we move forward, we as leaders elected by our people, must look many years ahead and think of our generations to come. With uncertainties in revenue and the federal budget, we must continue to work together to advocate at all levels of government. We remain focused on addressing and mitigating the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. We continue to urge our Navajo people to get fully vaccinated, which includes getting a booster shot.

We also take this opportunity to once again thank all of the frontline warriors and all of our Navajo Nation employees, and all of our county, state, and federal partners for your dedication and hard work in the midst of this pandemic. We join our Navajo people in praying for strength, wisdom, protection, and good health. We thank them for supporting all of our Nation's leaders. Together, we face many difficult challenges, but it is incumbent upon us to work together, to put differences aside, and address the issues that create barriers to progress and create real change. The changes that our people want to see in their lifetime.

Our ancestors passed down many good teachings, prayers, and values that have withstood the test of time and many adversities. Teachings such as T'áá hwó'ajít'éego, or self-reliance and self-determination, will help us along the way in everything that we strive to accomplish for our people. We thank you for the opportunity to present the State of the Navajo Nation Address and we wish you a productive Winter Council Session. May God bless each of you and may God bless the Great Navajo Nation.