



State of the Navajo Nation Address

Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and Vice President Myron Lizer
Presented to the 24th Navajo Nation Council
Spring Council Session – April 18, 2022

Yá'at'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 Spring Council Session.

Together, we brought in the new season of Spring, Daan, with collective thoughts, prayers, and hope. In many parts of the Navajo Nation, we heard the first thunder, awakening the hibernating animals and plants. It is a time of renewal for our Mother Earth, Nihimá Nahasdzáán, to maintain harmony and balance. Many families are also preparing their gardens for another successful harvest. Families and communities build unity, resiliency, and shared values by farming together. Our crops and plants provide nutrition and medicine throughout the year, and may we pray for abundance of rain and moisture.

We celebrated Easter and Good Friday with our families and loved ones, recognizing the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We hope that all of you were able to be with your family and enjoy this precious time with your spouse, children, parents, grandparents, and all who we hold close to our hearts. This morning, we began the week with a prayer service to ask for strength and blessings for our Navajo people. We come together every Monday morning to pray for our Nation and to help get us through the challenges that we face, including COVID-19.

On March 4, in coordination with our public health experts from the Navajo Department of Health, Indian Health Service, and all of the 638 health care facilities, the Navajo Nation transitioned to “yellow status” consisting of “moderate-low restrictions” including increasing gathering and capacity limits, re-emphasizing the safer at home order, and continuing the face mask mandate in all public places. Capacity limits for all businesses also increased to 75-percent based on the consistent decline in new COVID-19 infections within the past several weeks on the Navajo Nation.

Our Navajo people and our frontline warriors are doing a great job in keeping the numbers of COVID-19 cases low, but we must keep our guard up and continue to wear masks in public as we move forward. With a recent rise in cases of the Omicron sub-variant on the east coast, we are reminded of how quickly this virus can spread. We strongly urge our Navajo people to continue to be very cautious, get vaccinated, and keep praying for our communities. The fourth shot is now available for elders and those who are immunocompromised.

ARPA Hardship Assistance is another part of helping our people to get through this pandemic. The Office of the Controller has now issued over 300,000 hardship assistance checks to our people. There have also been technical assistance events held in Phoenix, Tucson, Albuquerque, and Salt Lake City in the past few weeks, and an upcoming event in Denver, CO. Our department personnel have been gracious to bring “Window Rock to the People.” Thank you for your continued commitment and service.

However, we understand that there are many inquiries from applicants and we ask our people to understand that there are still thousands of checks that are still being processed at this time. We will be holding another technical assistance event in Phoenix soon and we will continue to provide more information to our people.

Earlier this month, we issued a proclamation recognizing the month of April as “Navajo Nation Sexual Assault Awareness Month,” to acknowledge victims, survivors, and advocates and to increase awareness and prevention of sexual assault, sexual abuse, and sexual harassment in Navajo homes, schools, workplaces, and communities. Under the leadership of Dr.

Perphelia Fowler, the Division of Human Resources is holding several webinars this month. The most recent one focused on sexual harassment training, which is mandated for all Executive Branch employees. This is an important issue for us all.

In addition, the Office of the First Lady and Second Lady has been working collaboratively with the Division of Public Safety, Department of Health, Division of Social Services, Prosecutors Office, Department of Emergency Management and many external partners to develop a Tribal Community Response Plan (TCRP) aimed at finding lasting solutions to help find missing persons and to help heal our people.

The Tribal Community Response Plan will serve to guide the Navajo Nation and its partners to build response capacity, collaboration, and support for missing persons and their loved ones. The plan includes four components including law enforcement response, victim support services, media strategies, and the integration of community-based resources.

Many families know the personal heartbreak and trauma of missing loved ones on the Navajo Nation and throughout Indian Country. Multiple jurisdiction systems have historically failed the victims, their families, and survivors. Reporting, collecting, and sharing missing persons data among various jurisdictions characterizes this problem's true scope. We have to set a new tone of hope on this issue that impacts our homes and tribal communities. The Navajo Nation and our local, state, and federal partners agree that we need to reunite, restore, and heal our families and communities.

Last month, we hosted an interactive meeting with all external partners including the Arizona, Utah, New Mexico U.S. Attorney's Office, Federal Bureau of Investigation, US Marshall's Service Missing Children's Unit, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Gallup Police Department, Apache County, and many others to begin mapping a collaborative response plan.

There is a need for proactivity, collaboration, and support within the justice and public safety systems to protect our sacred Indigenous people, including

our precious children. Our deepest hope is that working together will heal, restore, and reunite families. The restoration of hozhó, balance, and harmony within our homes and society requires us to identify problems, investigate, analyze, and strategically resolve issues together.

We thank all of our partners for being a part of the ongoing discussions and strategizing. We need to help each other, even as community members, to locate and bring home our loved ones. Together, we will soon finalize the Tribal Community Response Plan, which will also supplement the Diné Action Plan.

Our communities have challenges that tie in with many of the social issues that we face as a Nation. Since coming into office in 2019, our vision has always been to help our Nation as a whole. Part of the overall challenge that we face is building our Nation's infrastructure to bring more water lines, powerlines, broadband and telecommunications service, housing, health care, and other critical services to improve the quality of life for our people.

Last week, we were invited to the NTUA Light Up Navajo appreciation event where we had the honor of meeting families that recently received electricity for the very first time in their lives. Ernest Hawthorne, from Coyote Canyon, was one of those individuals and he spoke about the joy that he felt when he was able to turn on a light switch to have lighting in his home for the very first time. It was a heartwarming moment for him and his family.

We also visited the new home of 89-year-old Kee Nez, a Diné Korean War veteran, who is having a hogan-style home constructed in Teecnospos, Arizona, through the Veterans Housing Program under the Navajo Veterans Administration. Sadly, their family lost their previous home to a fire. We visited with Mr. Nez and his wife and we saw the joy in their eyes as they saw their new home being built. Homes for our Navajo veterans are being built! The Navajo Veterans Administration is working with its partners to construct more homes in Tuba City, Red Valley, and other locations. As leaders, we need to do more to help our people. We ask the 24th Navajo Nation Council to approve American Rescue Plan Act funding as soon as possible to support these basic services for our people.

Construction season is now here and our people need homes, bathroom additions, and all of the basic necessities that we are well aware of. Our Nation's technical experts have developed a revised plan that addresses basic infrastructure, public safety, rural addressing, senior centers, wellness centers, detox and healing centers, assisted living facilities, warehouses for communities, transitional housing, economic development, housing and additional funding to ensure that all previous and new eligible applicants for hardship assistance receive the help they need.

This plan provides \$50 million for veterans housing, \$50 million for housing manufacturing facilities in regions of our Nation, and \$50 million to construct more homes for Navajo families. We need your support to move this forward so that we can get to work on the ground building homes for our people. In addition, our \$50 million housing proposal is separate from the federal housing dollars that are provided for through Navajo Housing Authority. Our Administration wants to directly respond to the housing needs of our people.

This proposal would also provide each of the 110 chapters with \$745,000 for local projects and initiatives on top of the infrastructure projects that are being proposed. We are also proposing to take \$42 million that was previously allocated to the Executive Branch for administrative costs to help fund this revised proposal, and we challenge the Legislative Branch to do the same by contributing at least \$5 million from their allocation. Each of these expenditure plans have been reviewed and deemed eligible by the Department of Justice for American Rescue Plan Act funding.

As we move forward, we understand that the needs are great in every community, especially the most rural areas, but we have to be mindful that we are required to be in compliance with the spending guidelines from the U.S. Treasury. There are a total of 83 guidelines that must be followed. That is a critical component in this process and one year has already passed since we received the initial allocation of ARPA funds. We need to approve this plan so that we can meet the federal deadline, ensure accountability and compliance with federal guidelines and Resolution CJY-41-21, and improve the quality of life for our people.

We ask for the support of the 24th Navajo Nation Council and we also have to take into account other sources of funding that are available such as the Indian Health Service SDS listing that includes \$543 million for major water projects in many communities, \$55 for broadband development through the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, rental assistance through NTUA, the Biden Infrastructure Law, reimbursements through FEMA, and other sources.

Recently, we met with White House officials and Congressional members to talk about ARPA and many other priorities. There are a few that we want to highlight including the need to reauthorize, extend, and expand the Radiation Exposure and Compensation Act to continue helping uranium mining exposure victims and their families. We are fully committed to working with Congress to push this forward and we let our voices be heard, on behalf of the Navajo Uranium Radiation Victims Committee and others, on this issue in many meetings with Congressional members and testimony of Capitol Hill.

We also met with key Congressional members and federal VA officials to establish a veterans' benefits outreach center on or near the Navajo Nation so that our veterans have services, including clinical and mental health services, available close to home. With over 10,000 Navajo veterans, we must hold the federal government accountable for providing the benefits to veterans for serving our country.

In meetings with several U.S. Senators, we requested their full support for the confirmation of Roselyn Tso to serve as the next Director of the Indian Health Service. As the current head of the Navajo Area IHS, she has done a remarkable job working together with the Navajo Nation to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic. She has exceptional experience and commitment that will serve all tribal nations well. We also thank the 24th Navajo Nation Council for your support of Director Tso's confirmation.

We also continue to seek more federal support for public safety facilities. We recognize the great needs in many areas including Shiprock, Window Rock, and other locations that have closed due to major facility safety concerns.

Under Navajo Police Chief Daryl Noon, the Navajo Police Department continues to move forward its efforts to focus on illegal activities related to gang, drug, and alcohol use. We fully support this work and we appreciate the 24th Navajo Nation Council's support on these issues and we look forward to securing the resources needed to build new facilities as quickly as possible.

Last but not least, we met with U.S. Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg and U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland to request their support for policy changes including a proposed inter-agency agreement between the two federal departments that would streamline the right-of-way clearance process to expedite the construction of new roads and improvements on the Navajo Nation. Similar agreements could potentially be used for other right-of-way issues related to water, power, and broadband development.

In 1948, Congress authorized the Interior Secretary to oversee the right-of-way process on tribal lands including those required for road developments. Under current laws, tribes also have to obtain two separate environmental clearances from federal agencies to proceed with most road projects. This process can take up to four or five years to complete. Under the proposed inter-agency agreement, the Bureau of Indian Affairs would transfer highway right-of-way and sources of material authority to the Secretary of Transportation, acting through the Federal Highway Administration for the Tribal Transportation Program. We will continue to work diligently with our federal partners to move this effort forward.

Recently, we also welcomed U.S. Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granholm once again to the Navajo Nation for a roundtable discussion to further implement the Nation's renewable energy development. Working together with federal, state, and other partners we can develop more emissions-free energy to power more homes and communities for our people.

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 the booster shots.

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 serve the common good, 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 Spring Council Session. May God bless each of you and may God bless the Great Navajo Nation.