



Special Session held to provide immediate assistance for Navajo families struggling with NTUA utility bills due to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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PHOTO: Council Delegate Wilson C. Stewart, Jr. participates in the 109th Annual Northern Navajo Fair and Parade in Shiprock, N.M.

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — Last Thursday, the 24th Navajo Nation Council convened during a Special Session to pass emergency legislation to approve a formal amendment to the Fiscal Year 2022 Navajo Nation Indian Housing Plan (IHP) for the Native American Housing Assistance and Self-Determination Act of 1996 (NAHASDA) Indian Housing Block Grant (IHBG) Funding.

Sponsored by Hon. Council Delegate Wilson C. Stewart, Jr. (Fort Defiance, Crystal, Red Lake, Sawmill). Legislation No. 0177-22 would allow the Navajo Housing Authority (NHA) to add emergency utility assistance payments for impacted low and non-low income Navajo families who continue to struggle due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

“I commend my fellow colleagues for listening to the communities they represent. Our people are still feeling the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic as they continue to struggle to provide for their household,” said Hon. Council Delegate Wilson C. Stewart, Jr. “As Council Delegates we have the opportunity to enact real change as we work with our enterprises to provide adequate services to our Nation.”

According to General Manager Walter Haase, the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority (NTUA) applied a Navajo Nation-wide temporary non-disconnect policy in efforts to provide Navajo

families with financial relief during the COVID-19 Pandemic. As a result, 14,000 residential accounts have been identified as 60 days past due totalling approximately \$9 million.

Due to the increased debt, NTUA notified Navajo Nation Leadership they will resume disconnection services for past due customers on September 19th, which was then extended one-week to September 26th in order to provide customers time to contact NTUA regarding payment arrangements.

“We are all attempting to recover from the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Navajo Nation continues to prioritize the safety of our Navajo families, including their crucial connection to utility services in their homes,” said Hon. Council Delegate Thomas Walker, Jr. (Birdsprings, Leupp, Tolani Lake, Coalmine Canyon, Cameron). “As representatives, we can empathize with the challenges inflation, unemployment, and low wages are having on our remote towns and their community members.”

With thousands of Navajo families placed in jeopardy, Navajo Nation Leadership convened with the Office of the Speaker, Office of the President and Vice President (OPVP), the Resources and Development Committee, the Navajo Housing Authority (NHA) and NTUA to discuss actions the Nation could take to assist the 14,000 past due residential customers across the Nation.

Consequently, the NHA Board of Commissioners unanimously passed Resolution NHA-5119-2022 in response to being a part of the solution to assist Navajo families. With the approval of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), NHA will be able to immediately issue an assistance check to NTUA on behalf of identified families with outstanding utility bills.

This combined effort of the 24th Navajo Nation Council and OPVP resulted in Resolution NHA-5119-2022 being approved and signed by Speaker Damon to update the IHP application to include utilities to address this emergency situation.

“I am appreciative of my colleagues of the 24th Navajo Nation Council for continuing to assist our Navajo people who have been faced with the possibility of utility disconnections,” said Speaker Seth Damon (Bááhaalí, Chichiltah, Manuelito, Red Rock, Rock Springs, Tséyatoh). “Across the Navajo Nation, there are many families without running water and electricity. As leaders, we need to work with our enterprises to ensure all of our people receive basic services.”

Lastly, NHA plans to assist Navajo families in New Mexico who do not have NTUA as their utility supplier with CARES Funding. According to NHA, they have three (3) years to gather and quantify data to assist New Mexico families.

Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez has 10 days after the legislation has been certified to sign the legislation into law.

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