



STATE OF THE NATION ADDRESS

President Bun Nygren

Presented to the
25th NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL

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Madam Speaker Curley, Madam Vice President Montoya, Madam Chief Justice Jayne, Members of the 25th Navajo Nation Council, distinguished guests, visiting dignitaries, and my Navajo people, Yá'át'ééh! I wish each and every one of you a happy and prosperous new year.

I'd like to acknowledge and congratulate Speaker Seth Damon, a colleague, my friend and dedicated servant of the Navajo people. I wish you the best in your new role as New Mexico's Deputy Secretary of Indian Affairs. Thank you for your nine years of service. We look forward to your work to restructure the capital outlay program for the state and tribal nations.

Let us wish a happy 106th birthday to Navajo Code Talker John Kinsel, Sr., of Lukachukai. Mr. Kinsel served during World War II in the 9th Marine Regiment, 3rd Marine Division from Oct. 1942 to Jan. 1946, taking part in the Battles of Guam and Iwo Jima. He was awarded the Purple Heart in 1989 for his service at Iwo Jima. Happy birthday and thank you for your service to the country and our Nation.

As we look outside, another storm may be coming. We have activated the Emergency Operations Center at NDOT and a temporary call center is up and running. NDOT reports it has already assisted 112 residents with snow removal and covered more than

3,000 miles of roads within the last month. For context, driving from New York City to Los Angeles will take you 2,800 miles. With multiple passes, we've cleared nearly 10,000 miles of Navajo Nation roads.

We've approved over \$30,000 in overtime, which will be reflected in the upcoming pay cycles for employees responding to the winter storm emergency. Some personnel opted to use comp time in lieu of overtime. We appreciate their tireless work during these times of emergency.

The recent storms prompted the First Lady and me to visit hard-hit, remote homes. We provided welfare checks of those who are isolated without necessities like firewood, food or transportation during heavy snowfalls. Chapter houses and their employees have been deemed essential workers, and have authority to declare local states of emergency and manage their own emergency funds to keep their people safe.

During this declaration, the Navajo Department of Health and other programs collaborated with Community Health Representatives who identify and aid those most vulnerable, especially elders. Despite intense conditions, staff from the Food Distribution Program and the Division of Aging and Long Term Care Support went to extraordinary lengths to deliver food and assistance to those cut off by the snow. I want to meet with the BIA and IHS to better define the role of CHRs to allow them to haul water and wood during emergencies like this. Let's recognize and show appreciation to our chapter staff, CHRs and those who respond with dedication to our people.

It is clear: we need to do better by our employees across the entire Navajo Nation. Within our own government, our effective minimum wage is only \$7.58 per hour. How does a single parent provide for children, pay for rent and gas to get to work on this wage?

On January 1, Arizona raised its minimum wage to \$14.35 per hour. Flagstaff raised its minimum wage to \$17.40. That's 2.3 times our minimum wage. We must become competitive if we want to see real progress for our Nation. This should apply to everyone on the Navajo Nation, not just tribal employees.

Council, I encourage you to pass the first modern minimum wage for the Nation. Let's get it done by the end of 2024.

Within the first few weeks of my Presidency, I reopened the government so our people could receive governmental services and for businesses to begin operations again. The shutdown not only impacted the livelihood of our business owners but stopped our

people from getting goods and services. Our businesses are starting to see a positive economic impact and have rebounded.

Since then, we have seen a robust upward trend in the nine taxes collected by the Navajo Nation. In 2023, we collected over \$142 million. That was \$35.2 million above our projected tax income for the year. In our last quarter, we collected nearly \$30 million. Our non-retail sales tax brought in the largest segment at \$17.2 million in taxes collected.

We celebrate Navajo Nation Sovereignty Day because of our right to enforce our own laws such as taxes. Going forward, we see our tax system as a new way to generate or recapture revenues in the areas of solar development, online shopping, and much more.

Some of our Navajo veterans have waited years to receive the services, housing and financial assistance. We have now completed a detailed review of the process involved to get payments issued more quickly. We have looked at successful models to set up payment systems, like the process used by TANF, for other financial assistance services like burial assistance.

Our veterans exemplify valor, patriotism and sacrifice that is a hallmark of all our Navajo people. I will continue to speak on the issue of the most rural veterans in the country, both here at Council and in Washington.

As we speak, the Northern Arizona Veterans Administration Health Care System holds its grand opening of the Chinle VA Clinic's Expanded Services at the Chinle Comprehensive Healthcare Facility. It is the first of several.

As Navajo Nation Veterans Administration Director Baldwin stated, care that is accessible close to home is paramount for *hozho* for our veterans and their families.

Thank you to Northern Arizona VA Medical Center Director Steve Sample who led this expansion of services. If I could be anywhere else today, it would be in Chinle for this grand opening.

Because the Navajo Nation is known as a Health Professional Shortage Area, my message to Congress is to fund more than clinics. Our veterans need a Veterans Administration Medical Center with a full staff and services.

Council delegates, your partnership has led to 58% of ARPA funds being encumbered and obligated. With your continued support, let's finalize a plan to ensure we use every dollar and return nothing.

In October, I signed a \$150 million contract with NECA to build more than 1,500 bathroom additions with water and sewer. DCD issued its first work order in November, and a second in December, 3 additions are complete, and 54 are currently under construction. I expect the third work order to hit my desk in the next two weeks.

I support Legislation No. 0014-24, the amendments to the Navajo Nation FRF Bathroom Additions expenditure plan to include additional expenditure categories.

Using ARPA money, DED will relaunch the ARPA relief program this month with grant options for our Navajo-owned companies and sole proprietors like sheepherders and weavers.

We also have the goal of bringing 5G coverage to all chapters by 2030 using ARPA dollars. Working toward this, 13.2 miles of middle-mile fiber has been constructed allowing connections to 600 homes in Ramah, N.M. Forty towers are being upgraded to increase 4G capacity across Navajo. This will benefit more than 26,000 cell phone users and over 10,000 homes across 6,000 square miles.

Our Department of Corrections secured \$3.6 million in ARPA funds to purchase two mobile detention centers that have been placed in Fort Defiance and Shiprock. We are waiting for waterline, sewer lines and electricity connections to become fully operational.

On January 11, the Nation was approved for \$88.7 million under the U.S. Department of the Treasury's State Small Business Credit Initiative. The first \$26.18 million is planned to be released early this year.

We are working with Change Labs to promote Navajo entrepreneurs by implementing loan programs for Navajo small businesses. Over the next 10 years, Change Labs will provide an estimated 707 business loans using \$21 million of SSBCI funds. The Navajo Nation has an estimated 1,675 self-employed individuals this funding can assist.

An additional \$19.18 million will be deployed as guarantees with finance institutions and to assist with climate resilience investments like food systems, local co-ops, processing centers, windmill manufacturing, technology, tourism and renewable energy.

In response to the biggest Medicaid financial fraud in Arizona history – when our unhoused, low-income Navajo citizens were taken to cities and checked into unlicensed facilities as clients and billing our people – our administration launched Operation Rainbow Bridge in May.

We worked to bring our people home or transition them to legitimate care providers. We have provided assistance to 997 help requests and transported 279 individuals back to Navajo.

We continue to work with state leadership to introduce legislation to provide greater oversight and protection for our people. Through these efforts, we were reminded of the need for sober living and detox centers.

In October, our Division of Behavioral and Mental Health Services and Navajo Department of Health opened the Nation's first Sober Living Center in Chinle. The center can provide transitional housing for up to 10 clients and their families who need positive support in a crucial moment in their journey towards recovery from addiction.

Thank you, Speaker Curley and Delegates Germaine Simonson, Shawna Ann Claw, Cherilyn Yazzie, and Dr. Andy Nez for your advocacy.

This is just the start. In 2024, the Shiprock Navajo Regional Behavioral Health Center Youth Residential Treatment Center will reopen to provide behavioral health services to Navajo youth, and we will pursue new treatment centers in Tuba City and Crownpoint.

We have taken every effort to ensure proper due diligence to protect the investment for our people when we purchased Goulding's.

The Navajo Nation expects to complete the 60 days due diligence period on February 12. The Nation will begin to collect tax revenues from Utah upon closure.

The agreed purchase price of Goulding's is \$59.5 million. Navajo Nation Hospitality Enterprise and the Nation have agreed to a profit sharing agreement, with a 50/50 split of distributable net income after deductions for Reserve Funds.

The project's projected annual net income is \$7.3 million. It will retain 280 local direct jobs. In addition, the project is expected to generate \$2.4 million in taxes annually to the Navajo Nation.

In October, Native Community Capital and Navajo Nation launched the Homeowner Assistance Fund application process to help Navajo homeowners who were negatively impacted by COVID-19. This fund was authorized by Congress through ARPA to

provide \$9.9 billion nationwide and \$55.4 million to the Navajo Nation to support homeowners who face financial hardships because of the pandemic.

To date, 200 Navajo applications have been received, and 96 have been approved. NCC will open the application portal to 100 new applicants each month, including today.

This program allows Navajo homeowners to qualify for tax-free, non-repayable money to pay for home repairs, pay their mortgages or reduce them and receive clear title assistance. The program will relieve Navajos of the COVID-related financial burden to be able to keep their homes.

Social Services launched resource fairs to provide information, with some scheduled for Gallup, Denver, Salt Lake City and Farmington.

On December 11, a crude oil pipeline was accidentally struck by a grader north of Shiprock causing an oil spill. Navajo Nation EPA, Police, Fire, and Emergency Management responded within the hour. The pipeline owner, Running Horse Pipeline, began the clean-up within hours, under NNEPA's oversight. My office reported the news as work proceeded on-task and alongside close monitoring. Cleanup is in its final stages.

Lastly, the three branch chiefs have received complaints about our criminal justice system. Each branch has their own respective responsibilities within the system. I ask and invite Madam Speaker and Madam Chief Justice to join me in a three branch chiefs meeting to discuss the challenges and work toward solutions for our people.

Thank you very much for working with me to get things done. Members of the Navajo Nation Council and my Navajo people, *Ahe'hee*.



CONTACT THE PRESIDENT & VICE PRESIDENT

