



25TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL

## 25TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**Law and Order Committee Chair Charles-Newton raises health concerns during meeting with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**



**Law and Order Committee Chairwoman Eugenia Charles-Newton joined the Coalition of Large Tribes for a high-level meeting with Acting Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Scott Davis.**

**WINDOW ROCK, Ariz.** — On September 10, Law and Order Committee Chair Eugenia Charles-Newton addressed critical issues affecting tribal communities with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Senior Counselor to HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., Mark Cruz, during a government-to-government consultation with senior federal leadership.

Chair Charles-Newton spoke about longstanding structural barriers in healthcare, vaccine equity, access to federal funding, and the urgent need for tribal consultation in agency reform efforts. She also addressed concerns about reduced COVID-19 vaccine allocations at Indian Health Service (IHS) facilities across the Navajo Nation, emphasizing that despite rising infections, some hospitals are receiving fewer doses than in previous years.

“Our communities are still battling the impacts of COVID-19, and we can’t afford to be left behind again,” said Delegate Charles-Newton. “Decisions are being made to limit vaccine access based on age or national supply models, without considering the health realities in Indian Country,”

Chair Charles-Newton reminded HHS officials of Secretary Kennedy’s recent visit to the Navajo Nation, where he acknowledged the legacy of federal food policies that contributed to chronic health conditions like diabetes and heart disease—factors that now elevate

COVID-19 risk across Native populations. In response, Cruz committed to raising the issue with the Deputy Secretary's Office and pledged to follow up on vaccine distribution protocols and supply inconsistencies.

During the meeting, Cruz outlined several upcoming HHS initiatives that address a broad range of tribal priorities. He announced a forthcoming funding opportunity through the Rural Health Transformation Program that is set to take applications within the coming weeks. Cruz encouraged tribes to collaborate with state partners and focus proposals on innovative health models rather than general operating support. He also expressed interest in organizing a tribal-state summit to accelerate strategic planning and coordination.

Regarding IHS reform, Cruz said two efforts are underway: a regional realignment to ensure more responsive direct services and a broader departmental reorganization intended to increase accountability and tribal engagement. He noted that expanding tribal representation at agencies like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was also under consideration, pending feedback from tribal nations.

Leaders from other tribes, including the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, Walker River Paiute Tribe, Blackfeet Nation, Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, and Oglala Sioux Tribe, addressed parallel concerns. They spoke of mental health crises, gaps in Medicaid access, and the need for culturally relevant nutrition programs, including the inclusion of Indigenous foods like bison and salmon in USDA food boxes. Cruz agreed to explore increased coordination between HHS and USDA to support these initiatives.

Chair Charles-Newton said the Navajo Nation and COLT will continue to advocate for greater equity in federal programs and policies that impact large land-based tribal nations through direct engagement with agencies like HHS.

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