



25TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL

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MEDIA CONTACT:

nnlb.communications@gmail.com

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Law and Order Committee reviews proposed amendments to Title 17



The Law and Order Committee met with the Office of the Prosecutor to review proposed amendments to Title 17 of the Navajo Nation Criminal Code.

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – On Monday, the Law and Order Committee (LOC) met with the Office of the Prosecutor (OTP) to review proposed amendments to Title 17 of the Navajo Nation Criminal Code. The discussion centered on strengthening public safety, addressing rising violent crime, modernizing outdated legal language, and ensuring the code reflects the current needs of Diné communities.

LOC Chair Eugenia Charles-Newton emphasized that communities have repeatedly called for stronger and more modernized criminal laws. “Our communities have been telling us for years that our criminal code no longer reflects the realities they face. Every chapter we visit asks for tougher laws, clearer enforcement tools, and accountability. These amendments are about protecting our people, restoring trust, and making sure the law works the way our citizens expect it to,” said LOC Chair Charles-Newton.

Chief Prosecutor Vernon Jackson reported on the multi-year effort to update Title 17, noting that the amendment package is the result of coordinated work across prosecutors, public defenders, courts, law enforcement, corrections, social services, Kayenta Township, and the Navajo Department of Justice.

The intent of the reform effort is to modernize the criminal code, correct long-standing technical issues, expand statutory protections, and ensure offenses involving children and vulnerable people are addressed with stronger legal tools.

Committee members raised concerns regarding penalties, enforcement challenges, and the community's expectation that crimes committed on the Navajo Nation receive appropriate punishment. Delegate Arbin Mitchell emphasized that many current penalties no longer reflect the seriousness of offenses occurring across the Nation.

"My communities are asking for updated penalties that fit the crime," Delegate Mitchell said. "If we say we are modernizing Title 17, then we need to make sure the amendments truly strengthen accountability. Our people deserve a code that works."

Chief Prosecutor Jackson agreed, noting that penalties for serious offenses have been revised in the proposal, while also acknowledging ongoing stakeholder discussions about balancing punishment with rehabilitation.

LOC Vice Chair Nathan Notah sought clarification about the stakeholder process, particularly the role and authority of the Office of the Public Defender in reviewing and objecting to proposed changes. He asked for a clear explanation of how that authority is applied, which types of cases it affects, and how disagreements are resolved. Vice Chair Notah also requested a detailed budget plan outlining how the Office of the Prosecutor intends to support implementation of the amendments once enacted.

"We need to understand the scope of the public defender's authority in this process and what it means for the reforms going forward," Vice Chair Notah said. "We also need a realistic plan that shows how these proposals will be carried out within our funding limitations."

Committee members also addressed concerns about the high number of repeat offenders who struggle with untreated mental health conditions. Kathleen Bowman, Director of the Office of the Public Defender, noted that while treatment options exist, many individuals decline services unless ordered by the courts.

Members underscored the urgency of these issues, adding that an overwhelming number of community chapters have asked for stronger laws, longer jail terms, and greater protections for victims. LOC Chair Charles-Newton reiterated that public safety concerns are widespread and deeply felt across the Navajo Nation.

"As we finalize these amendments, we need to ensure they reflect the lived realities of our people," Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty said. "Families affected by violence deserve a system that provides justice, not delays."

The committee also directed Chief Prosecutor Jackson to submit the finalized amendment package no later than January, stressing that the Nation cannot afford further delays. The committee made clear that if the amendments are not delivered by the January deadline, it will proceed without the prosecutor's office to ensure that the reforms move forward.

The Law and Order Committee accepted the report with three in favor and none opposed. LOC will reconvene with the Missing and Murdered Diné Relatives Task Force on December 17 to finalize the amendments.

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