



25TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL

## 25TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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### **Naabik'iyáti' Committee addresses state interference with traditional ceremonies for Navajo children in custody**



**Sponsor of Legislation No. 0114-26 Council Delegate Eugenia Charles-Newton.**

**WINDOW ROCK, Ariz.** — On Thursday, the Naabik'iyáti' Committee approved Legislation No. 0114-26, formally condemning actions by state governments or state-licensed agencies that deny or interfere with the right of Navajo children in state custody to participate in traditional Diné ceremonies, prayers, and spiritual practices.

The legislation reaffirms the 25th Navajo Nation Council's commitment to protecting the religious freedom, cultural identity, and spiritual well-being of Navajo children involved in state child welfare systems.

"Our children carry the future of the Diné people, and ceremony is how that future is passed from one generation to the next," said Council Delegate Eugenia Charles-Newton, the legislation's sponsor. "When a state agency prevents a Navajo child from participating in traditional ceremonies, whether by denying transportation, refusing access to medicine people, or confiscating sacred items, it does more than violate religious freedom. It repeats a painful history of forced assimilation that sought to separate our children from their identity, culture, and beliefs."

The measure responds to reports of agencies denying transportation to ceremonial sites, restricting access to family members and recognized Hataalii (Diné medicine people), and confiscating sacred medicines and ceremonial items.

The Navajo Nation Bill of Rights guarantees the free exercise of religion, and Legislation No. 0114-26 affirms that state agencies do not have the authority to override those protections.

The measure also recognizes existing federal and state safeguards for Native religious practices. The Indian Child Welfare Act protects the best interests of Native children while preserving tribal identity and family connections, and the American Indian Religious Freedom Act affirms the right of Native people to practice their traditional religions. Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah also provide protections for religious exercise under state law.

The legislation calls on state agencies to respect the right of Navajo children to participate in ceremonies at appropriate times, access ceremonial sites, maintain the presence of family members and Hataa'ii, possess sacred medicines and items, and practice the Navajo language as part of religious observances.

It further recognizes that decisions regarding traditional Diné ceremonies belong to Navajo families, clans, recognized Hataa'ii, and appropriate Navajo Nation authorities, not state agencies or non-Navajo institutions.

Legislation No. 0114-26 also acknowledges the lasting impact of federal policies that separated Native children from their families through boarding schools and other programs that suppressed Native languages, cultures, and religions. The measure states that denying Navajo children access to traditional ceremonies today continues that legacy and conflicts with federal laws intended to protect Native children and tribal sovereignty.

The legislation passed on the consent agenda by a vote of 17 in favor and three opposed. The Naabik'iyáti' Committee serves as the final authority for Legislation No. 0114-26.

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