



State of the Navajo Nation Address

Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and Vice President Myron Lizer
Presented to the 24th Navajo Nation Council
Summer Council Session – July 18, 2022

Yá'at'ééh to the Honorable Members of the 24th Navajo Nation Council, Speaker Seth Damon, Chief Justice JoAnn B. Jayne, as well as chapter, county, state, and federal leaders, and most importantly our Diné Citizens. On behalf of the Nez-Lizer Administration, we are pleased to present the State of the Navajo Nation Address for the 2022 Summer Council Session.

First, we want to take a moment to recognize and thank all of the men and women, including our Diné lawmakers, who took part in the horse rides over the last several days to honor the longstanding tradition of our past leaders who would travel on horseback long ago, to gather in the capital of our Nation for each Council session. We know that a lot of time, work, and resources go into the horse rides, so we thank you for honoring that tradition and teaching our youth about the ways of our elders.

COVID-19

This morning, we began the week with a prayer service to ask for strength and blessings for our Navajo people. We come together every Monday morning to pray for our Nation and to help get us through the challenges that we face, including COVID-19. Since the onset of the pandemic over two years ago, the top priority has been to save lives and protect the health of our people. We continue to work closely with our public health experts to caution our people and to reaffirm that the COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective in reducing the chances of severe illness caused by the virus.

The Navajo Nation remains in “yellow status” consisting of “moderate-low restrictions.” Again, we thank all of our frontline warriors who continue to put themselves at risk to treat COVID-19 patients and save lives. As we move forward in this pandemic, we commend our elders who have the highest vaccination rate among all age categories at 90-percent. Once again, our elders are leading the way and setting the example for all of us.

Based on what we have learned and experienced with the COVID-9 pandemic, the Navajo Department of Health has been directed to develop a playbook or a strategy for the Navajo Nation to use in the event of future pandemics. When COVID-19 began spreading around the world and eventually reached the United States, we took proactive measures but there was no playbook to guide us. We pray that our people never have to experience another pandemic, but we must also be prepared.

Approval of ARPA Funds

We thank the 24th Navajo Nation Council for approving over \$1 billion in funding through the American Rescue Plan Act to deliver water, electricity, broadband, housing for families and veterans, COVID-19 mitigation, bathroom additions, E-911/public safety, local chapter priorities, and to ensure that every enrolled member of the Navajo Nation can receive hardship assistance.

This was a well thought out plan that was developed by technical experts and Division Directors based on many meetings with input from the community level and many work sessions held by the Council. \$1 billion is not enough to satisfy every need or every elected leader, but we worked together, compromised, and delivered a resolution that will improve the quality of life for many of our people.

Elders, youth, veterans, students, families, and many others will benefit from the ARPA funds. Elders will get water lines, electricity, housing, and other basic necessities – they are not left out. Keep in mind that the Navajo Nation successfully implemented \$714 million in CARES Act funds that the Navajo people received in 2020 – those funds provided the first round of hardship assistance, electricity to 737 families and elders, \$60 million in direct financial

relief for Navajo artisans and business owners, hazard pay for frontline warriors, and many other infrastructure improvements. The ARPA funds will build on the success of the 2020 CARES Act, it will provide jobs, and help build our nation for future generations.

\$1 billion is the largest amount of funding approved by the Council at any one time, but based on past assessments we know that the needs of the Navajo Nation exceed \$20 billion and likely more, now, due to the rise in the costs of construction materials. The \$1 billion includes the following:

- \$215 million for water/wastewater
- \$96.4 million for home electricity connections
- \$120 million for broadband
- \$80 million for housing
- \$50 million for housing for Navajo veterans
- \$120 million for new hardship assistance applicants
- \$150 million for bathroom additions
- \$210 million for local chapter priorities
- \$35 for E911 and public safety
- \$19.2 million for health care
- \$5 million for cyber security
- \$15.5 million for former Bennett Freeze area housing

As Delegate Mark Freeland recently stated, this will be life-changing for many of our people. It will not address every need in every community, but it is a strong starting point to build our Nation and set us on a path of building communities for our young people to return home to one day.

Veterans Issues

Today, we have a group of Navajo veterans who marched to the Council Chamber to voice their concerns and we respect their concerns, but we also want to take this opportunity to highlight the progress that is being made.

On June 28th, we welcomed U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Denis McDonough to Gallup, N.M. for a small ceremony as the Navajo Nation

finally received recognition and became the first federally recognized tribe with a veteran service organization to be accredited by the federal VA. What does this mean? It means that for the very first time, the Navajo Nation now have access to the federal VA systems to prepare, present, and process veterans benefits claims for Navajo veterans. The Navajo Veterans Administration now has staff members who are processing federal claims at the local level in each of the five Navajo agencies on the Navajo Nation. This will help deliver federal benefits to Navajo veterans much more efficiently without having our warriors travel to cities off of the Navajo Nation.

When our Administration took office in 2019, the Navajo Veterans Housing Program was at a stand still and homes were not being built. Our Administration worked with veterans and the Navajo Nation Council to overhaul the housing program policy and successfully addressed deficiencies to restart the Veterans Housing Program. It took time to fix the policies and now, quality homes are being built for our veterans. In early June, we joined 73-year-old Vietnam veteran, Andrew Kelly, as he received a brand new home through the Navajo Veterans Housing Program. More homes are being built for our veterans and never before has our Nation invested such a large amount of funding for more homes – through the ARPA bill that was signed into law last Friday, an additional \$50 million will be used to build hundreds of new homes for our warriors.

On May 9th, we also signed Resolution CAP-20-22 into law, appropriating \$29 million to construct and operate a 60-bed nursing home for Navajo veterans which will be named “Navajo Warriors Home.” We thank Delegate Carl Slater for introducing the legislation and the 24th Navajo Nation Council for approving the bill. The new facility will be the very first nursing home on the Navajo Nation dedicated to Navajo veterans.

Those are just a few of the major accomplishments that we have finalized by working together with the Council and our veterans. When it comes to the budget for the upcoming 2023 Fiscal Year, let us be clear, there will be no shortfall or decreases in funding for Navajo veterans. There is a need for Title 12 to be amended to clarify how the annual funds are distributed from the Veterans Trust Fund and that will require approval from the Council.

The Department of Justice is working with the Veterans Administration to introduce that legislation very soon.

Plan for Senior Centers

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, government services were interrupted and that included senior centers. Our top priority is to save lives. At the time, we did not know much about COVID-19 and nor did we have the vaccines that we have today. Now that we are in a better state and have vaccines that help us to push back on the virus, we are prepared to introduce a plan that will request \$30 million to improve senior centers across the Navajo Nation.

Keep in mind that when the ARPA legislation was first introduced in May, the bill included an allocation for senior centers. That portion of the legislation was amended by the Council and those funds were allocated for local chapter priorities. Through the ARPA bill, each of the 24 members of the Council now has \$8.8 million for their legislative district and we strongly encourage each member to use those funds to address senior centers in addition to other local priorities. Every delegate has ARPA funding to direct to their local senior centers.

Support for Navajo Youth

On July 1st, we signed into law \$4 million for youth employment funds for the 110 Navajo chapters. The funds may be used throughout the year to employ Navajo youth, including students who are on break from school. We have visited many chapters where we have spoken with youth employment workers who are giving back to their communities, learning valuable skills, and earning funds that will help them get through school by paying rent or buying essential supplies for classes.

We thank those chapters that were proactive in allocating and saving funds from previous years to hire youth workers this summer. We appreciate their hard work and willingness to give back to our communities. Now that the ARPA bill has been passed and signed into law, we will once again turn our attention to gaining support and approval by the Council to allocate \$50

million from the Síhasin Fund for scholarships for Navajo students. This legislation will be reintroduced and we ask the Council for your support.

Nomination of Roselyn Tso

When it comes to protecting the health of our people and mitigating COVID-19, Navajo Area IHS Director Roselyn Tso continues to play a major role in partnering with the Navajo Nation to ensure that health care facilities have the resources needed for our people.

On May 26th, we had the honor of joining Director Tso in Washington D.C. for a hearing before the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. We spoke in support of her confirmation and highlighted her expertise and exceptional qualifications. Last Wednesday, the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs voted to support her nomination to serve as the head of the Indian Health Service at the national level. We will continue to support her as the confirmation now awaits a final vote by the full Senate.

Public Safety/Missing Persons

On June 25th, we had the honor of attending the graduation ceremony to recognize and congratulate the Navajo Nation Police Training Academy Class 57, comprised of 10 Diné men and women who completed the training academy and earned their Navajo Nation Police badge. In addition to adding more officers, we also allocated funding within the Executive Branch that added five new K-9 units that have helped our officers find and seize illegal drugs in our communities.

Within the last year, the Navajo Nation Division of Public Safety also created the Proactive Criminal Enforcement Program (PACE) comprised of K-9 units, the Drug Enforcement Unit, and commissioned police personnel that conduct field operations to uncover and stop or disrupt crimes related to drug use/sales, bootlegging activities, and violent crimes.

In addition to federal funding, the Office of the President and Vice President authorized the allocation of an additional \$500,000 to the Navajo Police Department to support the drug enforcement efforts and other public safety

operations, which have led to multiple seizures of large quantities of drugs, alcohol, and illegal firearms and the arrests of violent offenders. In the upcoming Fiscal Year Comprehensive Budget, we have allocated \$1 million in additional funding for the Proactive Criminal Enforcement Program and the Missing Persons Unit. We will also seek the Council's support for an additional \$250,000 for victims advocates to provide support for the families of missing persons. These are top priorities for our Administration.

In addition, as you may be aware, last October we signed into law the Diné Action Plan approved by the Council, which uses the traditional Navajo planning model of Nitsáhákees (thinking), Nahat'á (planning), Iiná (action), and Siihásin (reflection) to help address public safety, violence, substance abuse, suicide, and missing and murdered Diné relatives. Last week, we met with the designated work group that includes several members of the Council. The Diné Action Plan is a working document that will continue to guide our leaders as we continue to work together to address these critical issues in our communities. We understand that many of our people need support.

The Office of the First Lady and Second Lady continues to work collaboratively with the Division of Public Safety, Department of Health, Division of Social Services, Prosecutors Office, Department of Emergency Management and many external partners to finalize a Tribal Community Response Plan (TCRP), a component of the Diné Action Plan, aimed at finding lasting solutions to help find missing persons and to help heal our people.

The Tribal Community Response Plan will serve to guide the Navajo Nation and its partners to build response capacity, collaboration, and support for missing persons and their loved ones. The plan includes four components including law enforcement response, victim support services, media strategies, and the integration of community-based resources.

Road Infrastructure

On July 6th, we joined Delegate Carl Slater, Tsaile/Wheatfields Chapter officials and community members to mark the completion of Navajo Route

12, a primary route for Tsaile/Wheatfields residents, Diné College students, and first responders. In 2019, the Council and our Administration approved funding for the project with the support of the late Council Delegate Nelson S. BeGaye. The completion of this project by the Navajo Division of Transportation, in partnership with Navajo Engineering and Construction Authority, is a prime example of what we can accomplish by working together.

On June 22nd, we also joined Delegate Edmund Yazzie in Mariano Lake, New Mexico where the Navajo Division of Transportation and Navajo Engineering and Construction Authority are paving N11, north of Mariano Lake, and constructing a new bridge to make a safer route for residents and students who travel to and from classes at Navajo Technical University.

Unfortunately, the federal guidelines from the U.S. Treasury did not allow for road projects to be funded with ARPA funding. However, the Navajo Division of Transportation and Navajo Nation Washington Office are actively identifying funding opportunities within the Biden Infrastructure Law that was signed by the Biden-Harris Administration last October. There are plenty of infrastructure funding opportunities and our Administration is aggressively working with our federal partners to secure additional funds.

Support for Uranium Exposure Victims

While we continue to work toward the long-term extension and benefits under the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA), we can celebrate a short-term victory with the signing of a two-year extension of the Act by President Biden in June. Our Administration continues to work with the Navajo Uranium Radiation Victims Committee and Council members to extend the Act until 2040, expand downwinder eligibility based on geographic residency and expand the range of years that can be used for calculating exposure for certain individuals working in uranium mines, mills, or transporting uranium ore.

In addition to the reauthorization, the Navajo Nation continues to urge Congress to go further to include all downwinders, to expand eligibility for coverage under the program to include additional categories of uranium

workers and types of cancers and other radiation-related illnesses, and to increase the compensation cap to a minimum of \$200,000 per individual regardless of worker classification or category of disease. We will continue to fight for all victims and families of uranium mining and exposure.

Conclusion

The State of the Navajo Nation provides a brief overview of ongoing issues and recent accomplishments, but we understand that there are many more issues that our leaders need to address together. As we move forward, we as leaders elected by our people, must look many years ahead and think of our generations to come. Many of these issues can be addressed in the upcoming Fiscal Year 2023 Comprehensive Budget, but we must also do more within our communities.

COVID-19 remains a top priority. We remain focused on addressing and mitigating the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. We continue to urge our Navajo people to get fully vaccinated, which includes getting the booster shots. We also take this opportunity to once again thank all of the frontline warriors and all of our Navajo Nation employees, and all of our county, state, and federal partners for your dedication and hard work in the midst of this pandemic.

We join our Navajo people in praying for strength, wisdom, protection, and good health. We thank them for supporting all of our Nation's leaders. Together, we face many difficult challenges, but it is incumbent upon us to work together to serve the common good, to put differences aside, and address the issues that create barriers to progress and create real change. The changes that our people want to see in their lifetime.

Our ancestors passed down many good teachings, prayers, and values that have withstood the test of time and many adversities. Teachings such as T'áá hwó'ajít'éego, or self-reliance and self-determination, will help us along the way in everything that we strive to accomplish for our people. We thank you for the opportunity to present the State of the Navajo Nation Address and we wish you a productive Summer Council Session. May God bless each of you and may God bless the Great Navajo Nation.