

Navajo Nation police chief is stepping down

Written by By Arlyssa Becenti Source New Mexico <https://sourcenm.com>
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Francisco: Lack of support by government OFFICIALS, fractured criminal investigations create problems for OFFICERS, dangers to the public

Navajo Nation Police Chief Phillip Francisco is leaving the position he's held for five and half years. He'll instead become chief of police for Bloomfield, N.M., and will begin his new job Jan. 4.

Before Francisco was named Navajo Nation police chief, it had been well over a decade since someone was in that role. Instead, the department had a revolving door of acting chiefs. Francisco came on board after working at the Farmington and Aztec Police Departments and the San Juan County Sheriff's Department. He is also an Army veteran and was a member of the New Mexico National Guard.

His sudden departure is partly about access to his pension from New Mexico, he said. He's so far put in about 17 years into the N.M. retirement system, and in order to receive a full state pension, he needs to work another four years. This new job will allow him to do so.

But this is only one factor as to why he is leaving.

"There has been frustration, not in the police department, but external of the police department," he said.

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The frustration stems from the lack of support from Navajo Council delegates, as well as the bureaucracy within the Navajo government, he said, all of which hindered the police department's ability to move forward and improve.

"Trying to move projects forward, the red tape, the bureaucracy of the Navajo Nation has stopped the ability for us to move forward any further," Francisco said. "All the projects I did I was able to do internally, with the staff and resources I have."

Francisco worked with staff within the Navajo Nation Police Department to change things for the better, he said.

"I'm really proud of my officers and staff on how hard they worked to improve things," he said. "I hate to leave that behind, but I have to take this opportunity for myself."

Under Francisco's leadership, the department was able to increase the pay for officers to make it comparable to other departments, which helped with recruitment retention.

They also revitalized the Navajo Police Academy that had been dormant for years. Along with Francisco, the Navajo Nation Police Department created criteria called Peace Officer Standards and Training for the academy.

They also worked to improve 911 emergency dispatch services, got body cameras to officers, brought in five new K-9 dogs, created the deputy chief position and a spokesperson job.

Police buildings are still a major need, he said, but the Navajo Nation Police Department was able to move the Shiprock Police District into a former post office. Just recently, Window Rock Police moved out of the hazardous building that was its headquarters to the former Tsehootsoi Elementary School, after years of trying to find a new building or get a building built.

These dangerous structures have been a major concern for Francisco, and while he had

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attempted to get governmental leadership to help find safer buildings for his staff and officers, no one assisted, he said.

The department needs 775 officers to meet community demands, according to consultants with the company Strategy Matter and Public Safety Leadership, which Navajo Nation Police brought on board. This assessment, Francisco said, is a good document to help move the department forward with clear information.

“All of this stuff we are talking about was done by myself and my staff with very little outside help,” Francisco said. “We had to navigate the horrible bureaucracy of the Navajo Nation government and programs for approvals. Council delegates provided little if any help. This is what we did on our own, took the initiative and planned it.”

He said the lack of support from the Navajo Nation government — mostly Council delegates, and especially his oversight committee Law and Order — have kept them at a standstill, and there’s nothing more he can do. It’s “pretty sad,” he said, because they have other projects they want to pursue.

“They have not helped with any of the projects I need help with or would improve the effectiveness or efficiency of the department,” he said. “Committee meetings were not productive at all and distracted us and took us from the work we are trying to do: to serve the public.”

At the beginning of the pandemic, Navajo Nation police weren’t able to take leave because they had to work to implement mandates such as COVID checkpoints, among other things. So, in hopes to help his officers with excess leave hours, by increasing the carryover of these hours, he requested the assistance of the chairperson of the Law and Order committee. She did not help, Francisco said, and this is just one example of leadership’s inability to assist Navajo Nation Police.

“At the end of the year they lose it if they don’t use it,” he said. “We are in such a high demand to get things done with our communities, we can’t afford for people to take leave for weeks at a time. It causes our officers to lose hundreds of hours of leave.”

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He said leaving was a hard decision for him to make, because he will miss his staff and officers. But now Francisco is looking forward to his next role with a supportive environment, he said, where people will actually listen to the chief of police. During his interview for the position, Francisco said he instantly felt it would be a supportive workplace.

“I love the employees of the Navajo Police Department,” Francisco said. “The staff, they all are the hardest working people that I ever met. So, it’s a difficult decision, but it’s for my personal interest, retirement and my mental health.”

The separation of the Criminal Investigation Unit and the Navajo Police Department is a detriment to officers, he said, and one of the biggest threats to the Nation.

Criminal Investigation is a separate entity that deals with probing aspects of crimes or homicides.

“Being a separate unit where there is no communication is where a lot of things are failing,” he said. “I’ve brought that up since day one, and no one has tried to mend it. The chief of police should oversee all aspects of law enforcement. When there is a case and we work it, and then it is turned to them, we have no control.”

As chief, Francisco said he is always scrutinized by the public during criminal investigations though he’s not in charge of them.

This crops up, too, around incarceration, though he’s not in charge of Corrections, either.

As he leaves, Francisco said he maintains, as he always has, that government officials need to address alcohol and drug abuse “which is the biggest problem on the Navajo Nation.” He said these issues are the main cause of missing people, domestic abuse, and even homicides.

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“There has not been any attention to this and I have tried,” Francisco said. “Leadership needs to look at this and stop distracting the citizens with other initiatives, which are a small part of the bigger problem.

“We talk about gang problems, missing people — all of this goes back to drug and alcohol abuse,” he said.

Although the major failing is with Navajo leadership, Francisco said he will always support the officers and staff, even if he is no longer their chief of police.

<https://sourcenm.com/2021/11/29/navajo-nation-police-chief-stepping-down/>

Editor’s Note: Daryl Noon, who has served as the Deputy Chief of Police for the Navajo Nation since Jan. 2019 will transition to serve as the new Chief of Police for the Navajo Nation at the end of the year. He previously served with the Farmington Police Department in several capacities, including deputy chief, for more than 23 years. He is a member of the Navajo Nation and was born in Fort Defiance, Ariz. and previously resided in Shiprock, N.M.

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