



Native women stand together

The Southwest Women's Law Center in Albuquerque hosted a meeting Feb. 17 at the El Morro Events Center, with a focus on Native American women's issues and the ways to strengthen and support to their community.

The SWLC also has plans to house an Indigenous Women's Resource Center in Gallup.

As Native American women from the area came together Feb. 17, the SWLC focused on five major areas: affordable healthcare, domestic violence, fair pay, Title VII sexual harassment, and women's reproductive rights.

Pamelya Herndon, executive director of the SWLC, said the reason for the meeting was to look at ways to lift up Native American women, and to create the resources for them to move forward. She said Gallup was the perfect place to do so.

"Gallup is at the forefront for the location for holding the Indigenous Women's Resource Center,

because Gallup has the highest percentage of Native residents," Herndon said. "Therefore, [it is] the best place to situate the resource center, and once the New Mexico Resource center gets going, the next step is to get the New Mexico Congress of Indigenous Women right here."

Herndon said the center's focus on Native American women started when she saw the disparity in how they were being paid compared to their male peers.

"We were looking at Native American Women's Equal Payday, and looking at the fact that it took 21 months for Native American women to earn what white non-Hispanic men were earning in twelve months," she said. "That was just the beginning, I came down to visit the McKinley County Health Alliance at one of their meetings and [listened] to all of the conversations that were going on. We thought there has to be an intersection between the Southwest Women's Law Center and the women who were telling their stories."

According to Herndon, this brought about the whole idea of having an Indigenous Women's Resource Center in New Mexico. It was also why they chose Gallup to be its home.

"Every state can have its own center, so that's why we were looking to have one right here in New Mexico," she said. "I want to create a safe space to discuss these issues. I've also been working with the UNM School of Law, where students will be trained representing those sitting in Tribal courts. Too many times evidence was destroyed or lost. We want those Native women to know that they will be heard."

During the meeting, breakout sessions were given for each of the topics, and talking circles were held for about 30 minutes. The small groups then reconvened as a larger group to share thoughts about what was discussed during the talking circles.

COMMUNITY RESPONSE

Representing the Mayor and the City of Gallup, Councilwoman Linda Garcia was quite impressed with the meeting.

"I was impressed with the way both women and men came together as one, and not necessarily finding fault with the system but finding solutions and that's what we are here to do today, finding the solutions," she said. "We will be a part of it and do what we can as a city to whatever the organization needs. We will join the fight with them and we'll do whatever we can."

Rep. D. Wonda Johnson, D-Crownpoint, showed her support for the meeting.

"This was a great event as we had ladies participate from all corners of the region, representatives from around the area talking about various issues pertaining to women's Indigenous rights," Jackson said. "I am familiar with all the issues spoken here, this is good beginning and a good place to start. We will continue to discuss these issues and then create a strategic plan and move forward."

Local organizations, inculding Battered Families Services Inc., who deal with Indigenous women's rights, were in attendance to show their support. Willard Eastman, director of Battered Families, found the meeting informative.

"I liked it and it was very informative. I like it when there's a group of women from Gallup getting together to talk about our problems, the domestic violence, the sex trafficking here," he said. "I think it's a plus to have this type of group here in our community. I think the awareness is going to be out there and having this type of organization coming in and pushing it is going to bring it to the forefront and I hope soon."

Patricia Nelson, legal advocate for Battered Families, is no stranger to to the issues discussed, and was also was glad for the meeting.

"It's really great that the community is coming together; we were talking that there are so many good organizations in Gallup," Nelson said. "But we're just so all separate, and I think it's time we get together more and make this more often."

Herndon was pleased overall with the meeting, and is looking forward to the next one.

"We really had a wonderful crowd here and everyone contributed to all of the discussions, so it was a really awesome day," she said.

For more information on the Southwest Women's Law Center, call (505) 244-0502 or visit their website at www.swsomenslaw.org .

By Dee Velasco
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