

## Navajo Nation Council addresses disability initiatives

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WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — Speaker Crystalyne Curley welcomed representatives from the Navajo Nation Advisory Council on Disabilities to Window Rock, Ariz. on April 23 to meet with members of the 25th Navajo Nation Council to push action items forward regarding accessibility issues facing the Navajo Nation’s disabled population.

“The voice of our disabled population has long been neglected. The Advisory Council has drafted legislation and surveys that address efforts to improve our chapter houses, polling places, and other public places to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act,” Crystalyne (Tachee/Blue Gap, Many Farms, Nazlini, Tselani/Cottonwood, Low Mountain) said.

The meeting focused on accessibility to polling sites that include chapter houses. Discussion items also focused on barriers such as the need for more ADA accessible homes through the Navajo Housing Authority and improving ADA compliance throughout the annual fairs held on the Navajo Nation.

According to NNACD President Hoskie Benally, the Advisory Council and the Native American Disability Law Center conducted a survey that identified accessibility barriers commonly found at polling sites on the Navajo Nation. The NADLC presented a report that compared accessibility findings for Navajo Nation polling sites between 2013 and 2023.

“Commonalities found across the Nation include undesignated parking spaces for disabled

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individuals, uneven and unsafe parking lots, impassable entrances and interior doors, no available ramps, doors with uncompliant levers, and uncompliant restrooms,” Benally said.

The NNACD asked for assistance in disseminating an updated polling survey and mandating that all 110 chapters complete the surveys regarding ADA accessibility.

Resources and Development Committee Vice Chair Casey Allen Johnson spoke about how he worked with a disabled community member to address ADA compliance issues at the Tuba City Chapter house, where improvements were eventually made using local tax funds.

“Many communities still need accessibility improvements to their facilities. Anything we can do to empower our disabled population, my colleagues are supportive,” Johnson said.

NNACD member Nicole Curley talked about bringing all annual fair events into ADA compliance. She said the NNACD has created an online petition advocating for accessibility improvements that received thousands of signatures.

“Within the Navajo Nation fairs, we need to be inclusive to the disabled. What I’ve noticed in advocacy is that the disabled are not mentioned. They weren’t mentioned in the State of the [Navajo] Nation Address. No one talks about them,” Nicole said.

Council Delegate Danny Simpson, a longtime advocate for the Advisory Council on Disabilities, said the RDC only has oversight over the Navajo Nation Fair that takes place in the Nation’s capital, but could consider more options to address the concerns.

“We need to work with you, the experts, to initiate legislation to address these issues faster — we cannot wait years to resolve these problems. We also need to mandate that chapter facilities are in ADA compliance. We should consider creating an enforcement or compliance office on the Nation,” he said.

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The NNACD also addressed housing issues. According to their report, the Navajo Nation has an estimated 40,000 disabled individuals. Federal Housing and Urban Development guidelines indicate that 5% of homes on the Nation need to be accessible for the disabled.

Benally thanked the Council for meeting with the group and noted that the NNACD has been unsuccessful in getting a response from the President's Office to regroup on these issues.

"We are with the Navajo Nation government under Title 13. We are responsible for addressing these issues on behalf of the disabled. All we're asking for is respect," Benally said.

The 25th Navajo Nation Council created a list of action items brought up in the meeting including drafting a legislation mandating all 110 Chapters to complete ADA accessibility surveys, drafting amendments to the Navajo Nation personnel manual, having NHA provide a report on disability concerns to the RDC, and to have the RDC address the Navajo Nation Fair's ADA compliance.

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