

Navajo Nation teleconference addresses COVID-19

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
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Safety advice from tribe's response team

Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and Navajo Nation Vice President Myron Lizer held a teleconference March 18 to address the growing spread of COVID-19, or coronavirus.

The conference was held after the Navajo Nation confirmed its first two cases of COVID-19 in a statement March 17. Both cases were located in the Chilchinbito area, south of Kayenta, Ariz. The two patients have been transported to a hospital in Phoenix for treatment and are in stable condition as of March 18.

Nez said these are uncertain times where information is changing by the minute, hour, and daily. He said a lot of Navajos would want to hear one of their leaders update people and the media on what the Navajo Nation is doing to quell the growing number of positive cases.

On March 13, Nez declared a health emergency for the Navajo Nation, following both the state and federal governments making similar declarations. The declaration was paired with an executive order to reduce the traffic in Window Rock by reducing the number of nonessential services and staff commuting to work.

“Many of the [nonessential] employees are sent home with work they can perform there,” Nez said. “We thank you for all that you do and continuing to keep the government open and running.”

Nez then discussed the two confirmed cases in Chilchinbito, saying the two patients' conditions were the result of travelling off the reservation. As such, Nez said an order was issued to limit the number of visitors and tourists to the Navajo Nation.

Numerous tribal casinos, tourist spots, and points of interest across the Navajo Nation have now been closed for a minimum of three weeks. The tribe will also be setting up billboards across the reservation stating those destinations are closed while also giving contact

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information for viewers to reach if they have questions about COVID-19.

Lizer said the teleconference, which was streamed on Facebook and YouTube, was an opportunity for the administration to quell the concern in the land, and mentioned that it is an administration that embraces prayer and different faiths.

“We are going to do everything we can, but we must also leave it in the hands of our creator,” Lizer said. “As First Nations people, our prayers are powerful. All of our nation, and all of the globe, we are not alone in this.”

First Lady Phefelia Nez gave viewers advice that has been commonplace in the past week: clean your hands thoroughly with soap at regular intervals, avoid touching your face, and cover any coughs. This is in addition to not leaving the house unless it is absolutely necessary, like for work, or for groceries and medicine.

If you share a household with someone who is sick, give them their own room to isolate and minimize contact between them and other family members to reduce the risk of spreading the illness.

The First Lady also urged viewers to use the time they are isolating or quarantining at home to spend with family, and perhaps teach their children about the Navajo language and culture.

“Get plenty of rest, eat good food. Don’t try to scare your children. Try to continue on as adults and as a family,” she said. “If we keep doing these practices every day, we’ll be fine.”

Other members of the administration or local health organizations spoke to what is being done to prepare for and reduce an influx of cases.

Navajo Nation Chief Justice JoAnn Jayne said there is currently limited public access to the courts, and they are allowing employees who can work from home to do so. Everyone who does

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come to one of the courts is encouraged to clean their hands and follow the precautions in place.

Jill Jim, executive director for the Navajo Department of Health, reiterated the advice given by the First Lady to minimize the spread of COVID-19, and added to avoid social gatherings of more than 10 people and conduct self-care through a 14-day isolation period.

“The virus is very new, but we have the skills to combat it,” Jim said. “It is up to the individual communities to keep the virus from spreading.”

Loretta Christensen, chief medical officer for Indian Health Services, said a strain on resources is limiting the number of COVID-19 tests they can perform, but they are partnering with additional labs to increase testing across the reservation, which will be done on a priority basis, allowing the patients with the most severe symptoms to get tested first.

Christensen also said IHS is going to discontinue a number of non-urgent services to get more people to stay home. She said IHS facilities have a total of about 170 beds, 13 ICU beds, 52 isolation rooms, and 28 ventilators. Whether this capacity will be enough will depend on how the virus escalates, she added.

In the meantime, she urges people to take care of themselves.

“You can take walks, you can be outside your home, but we’d like to keep healthy people away from the facilities and away from possible exposure,” she said.

President Nez said every Thursday at 6 pm, he will be live on KTNN, AM 660, to give updates and public service announcements in both English and Navajo, and they would encourage other local stations to do the same. He said the administration will try to be as transparent as it can with information.

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He urged viewers to be cautious.

“Take care of yourself, pray for our nation. We’ll get through this,” Nez said.

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