

COVID-19 Relief Fund marks three months providing relief for Navajo, Hopi families

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TSIIIZII, DINÉTAH (LEUPP, NAVAJO NATION) — The Navajo & Hopi Families COVID-19 Relief Fund marks its third month of operations as the Navajo Nation remains a hotspot for COVID-19. The Navajo Nation has, 5,808 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 269 who have passed on in just three months as curfews and restrictions on businesses are lifted throughout the U.S.

“Our all-volunteer leadership team remains steadfast and committed to diligently protecting the well-being and health of vulnerable Navajo and Hopi community members during the COVID-19 pandemic,” Relief Fund founder Ethel Branch said. “That this effort has grown from a small crowdfunding campaign with a handful of volunteers shopping, sanitizing and making deliveries, to a massive region-wide effort with international attention in just twelve weeks, has been incredibly remarkable and humbling.

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“We are blessed and grateful for the amount of contributions and the many people who have stepped up to volunteer. Even though many are eager to return to their normal routines, we must continue to be vigilant as this crisis is not over. It truly is up to all of us to find ways to work together to stop the spread,” she said.

Beginning on March 15, a group of 12 Navajo and Hopi women and one Navajo man have mobilized what has become one of the largest all-volunteer indigenous mutual aid relief efforts in the U.S. To date, the Relief Fund has served over 8,000 households, averaging 4 people per household, in 81 of the 110 Navajo Chapters and 7 of the 12 Hopi Villages. They have raised over \$4.7 million, which at their current rate of operations of bringing approximately \$100,000 worth of food, water, and essential items to Navajo and Hopi communities each week, is enough to continue providing direct relief to these communities for another 11 months.

“Ahéhee’. You are first responders and should be deemed essential for the purposes of conducting your incredible and critical work,” Navajo Nation Council Delegate Carl Slater said.

The Relief Fund is an initiative of Yee Ha’oolniidoo, a nonprofit formed under Utah law on April 1. The Rural Utah Project Educational Fund, a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) nonprofit, is the organization’s fiscal sponsor. The Governing Board of Yee Ha’oolniidoo is all Navajo women, and the Leadership Team for the Relief Fund is all Navajo and Hopi women, and one honorary Navajo male member.

The primary objective of the Relief Fund is to flatten the curve on the Navajo Nation and the Hopi Reservation, primarily through providing food and water to high risk, vulnerable, and COVID-positive community members, so they are able to stay home and practice social distancing. The Relief Fund also provides personal protective equipment to community members and various high-contact groups, such as community health representatives, first responders, police officers, and medical staff.

Donations to the fund through GoFundMe are used to make bulk order purchases of healthy and nutritional foods including meats, fruits, vegetables, healthy fats, and carbs that are unloaded, sanitized, assembled and packaged into Kinship Care Packages by volunteers.

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The Kinship Care Packages also include items such as face masks, hand sanitizer, body soaps, and cleaning supplies. Each package varies based on availability of items, and costs on average \$100 per box, not including transportation, rentals, and sanitizing supplies.

“We put a lot of care and thought into healthy foods that many of our community members may not otherwise have access to,” Vanessa Tullie, a volunteer and Leadership Team member with the Relief Fund said. “Our communities face a 50% unemployment rate and only have 13 grocery stores to cover a land mass the size of West Virginia.

“Additionally approximately 33% of community members live without running water or electricity. This existing infrastructure crisis has exacerbated the public health crisis of COVID-19. We’re doing everything we can to safely ensure vulnerable Diné and Hopi families have necessary supplies to stay home during this pandemic,” Tullie said.

“I want to really thank the people who have gathered this stuff for the Navajo & Hopi COVID-19 Relief,” Emerson Curley, the Navajo Nation Steamboat Chapter Commission President said. “We couldn’t believe how much stuff that was brought out: different varieties of produce, different varieties of groceries.

“We say thank you from the bottom of our hearts from all of the community members. I wish you would have heard some of the expression from the community members as we gave the food boxes out to them today. They were really appreciative,” Curley added.

The Relief Fund also has an initiative called “Navajo Seamstresses United COVID-19 Dooda” with over 300 seamstresses from throughout Navajo and Hopi, as well as off-reservation communities in the four corners states, New York, and Georgia. This initiative has distributed 37,515 masks, hospital gowns, shoe covers, scrub caps, and face shields as of June 3.

In addition to hundreds of community-based volunteers, the Relief Fund coordinates supplies and distribution with a diverse range of partners including local grassroots relief groups and individuals, Navajo Nation Council Delegates, Navajo Nation Chapter House Officials, and Hopi community leadership.

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Navajo Nation Council Delegate Charlaine Tso said, “I am very thankful for the collaboration with the Navajo & Hopi COVID-19 Relief Effort. I implore my colleagues, and all within the leadership capacity to extend their helping hand and services to this organization to serve every family on the Navajo Nation.

“We are called into these positions by the will of the Creator. So, undoubtedly I know we all have the power and strength to bring our people through this pandemic. We have come to a huge understanding of needs and functionality, so I will do my best to make sure the Legislative Branch will remain in support, and to provide assistance when needed to the relief organization. Ahe’hee’!” she said.

Donations can be made to Navajo & Hopi Families COVID-19 Relief at <https://gf.me/u/x3jc2q>