

Police training resumes at Navajo academy

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WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — The Navajo Police Training Academy resumed its police training program on June 15. The training academy leadership adjusted the program to protect the expected 25 recruits who will be reporting to the academy located in Chinle, Ariz.

Class 55 police recruits will be the fourth class to be trained under the Navajo Nation's police academy since its reopening in 2018, and the academy's first class to undergo a training program while dealing with a global pandemic.

"We are implementing protocols and incorporating preventative measures that have been recommended by our partners with the Centers for Disease Control and Indian Health Services to ensure the health and wellbeing of our police recruits." Chief Phillip Francisco said.

Although Class 55 police recruits will begin their training program under unconventional circumstances, their understanding of the dedication and commitment needed to be a Navajo Police Department officer has been their first lesson in service and duty.

"Our officers encounter dangerous situations on any given day and this pandemic is an added layer of risk that our officers have to work through," Francisco said. "Our current officers are leading the way and setting the example for these new recruits by showing the dedication NPD has for the people we serve, even during these uncertain times."

Class 55 was originally scheduled to begin training in April, however the class was temporarily postponed, with all recruit drives suspended until further notice due to COVID-19 on the Navajo Nation.

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“This pandemic may have slowed our plans in the beginning, but it is not going to stop us from moving forward. We need to resume our academy to plan for the future and to get more officers in our communities.” Francisco said.

Various factors influenced the reopening of the academy, including preparing for a possible second wave of the pandemic, as well as filling position gaps that will be left after veteran officers, who announced their retirement plans prior to the pandemic, leave the department by the end of the year.

The department also had a total of 13 officers who tested positive for COVID-19. The Chinle District had the highest number of officers in isolation. That challenged the department in terms of coverage and increased the need to resume training efforts for new officers.

“It was a challenge at the time. Our officers were answering daily calls of service while also overseeing curfew enforcement operations in addition to providing coverage for the Chinle police district,” Francisco explained.

Recruits will notice the program has temporarily transitioned from a 22-week training program to 15 weeks with all recruits required to remain at the facility for the entirety of their training. The training academy will have restricted access and will be closed to the public.

“The curriculum remains the same as it would be for the full 22-week program, we are not lessening the training time or cutting any curriculum, rather we will be extending the training days from four days a week to six days a week.” Navajo Police Training Academy Lt. Emmett Yazzie said.

To prioritize recruit safety, academy leadership has been working closely with health care physicians from the Chinle IHS unit and established partnership with the Navajo Health Command Operations Center and Centers for Disease Control.

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Dr. Jill Moses, Director of Public Health with the Chinle Comprehensive Health Care Facility, has been working closely with the academy by taking a proactive approach, including participating in a facility walkthrough to discuss the academy's protocol regarding measures for prevention and sanitizing the area.

Recruit training officers have also reached out to local businesses to allow time for recruits to shop for essentials and use essential facilities in an effort to lessen the risk of exposure to COVID-19 when they are outside the academy gates.

"Many departments have continued their academy training during this pandemic and coming to the decision to resume the Navajo Nation's police academy was not made lightly," Francisco said, "Safety is of the highest priority and I have confidence that Lt. Yazzie and the training officers will leave no stone unturned to ensure our recruits will be successful and safe during their training."

The recruits will be expected to wear a mask at all times, monitor their temperature daily and practice social distancing during classroom sessions.

The academy has also established protocols should a positive case arise during the training. If a recruit tests positive at any time he/she will be separated from the facility and remaining recruits will implement quarantine measures with everyone being retested by the local healthcare facility.

Individuals who cannot complete the training due to testing positive for COVID-19 will not be eliminated from the training program, but rather they can return as part of a future academy class.

Class 55 is expected to graduate from the academy on Oct. 3.