

## Luján calls for Na'nizhoozhi Center meeting

Written by By Bernie Dotson Sun Correspondent  
Friday, 11 March 2016 09:58

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### Meeting headlines funding, ongoing alcoholism that plagues area

U.S. Congressman Ben Ray Luján, D-New Mexico, met with area officials March 4 to shed light on future funding mechanisms related to the Na'nizhoozhi Center, Inc., commonly called NCI. Not lost in the discussion were the myriad of problems that lead people to places like NCI. The meeting lasted about 90 minutes and was held at the El Morro Second Street Events Center.

Currently, NCI receives funding some \$400,000 annually in state funding, and receives roughly \$84,000 per month from the city of Gallup for its residential and detoxification components. The city's most recent contribution ran its course from Oct. 2 to Feb. 29 of this year. The monthly payment was extended Feb. 23, as per city council vote, until June 30.

"The meeting was very productive," Luján said. "I think when you bring this many people together from so many different organizations that something very positive comes from it."

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Luján said that he'd like for the same people who attended the meeting to come together again April 4 to move that much more down the road to resolution. He said such mass participation was important, considering NCI – Gallup's sole detox center and also a residential treatment center – needs some more funding to continue its mission of helping people get through alcohol and substance abuse.

NCI Executive Director Kevin Foley volunteered to give a report to the Navajo Nation's Health Education and Social Services Committee. Foley said such a report is necessary so that the prospective funding entities know the scope of what NCI deals with on a daily basis.

"I think the meeting went well," Foley said. "At this point, we continue to dialogue with the parties present at the meeting."

The meeting took on the root causes of what leads people to NCI and touched on the city's "Drunktown USA" moniker. McKinley County Commissioner Genevieve Jackson said the substance abuse problems of Gallup shouldn't be written off as something simply characteristic to Native Americans.

Gallup and McKinley County have a Native American population of just more than 50 percent. The intake at NCI is predominantly Native American and when funding becomes a sticking point it is typically the city that comes forward, officials representing the city said.

"Racism is the hidden elephant in the room," Jackson said. "Everyone here knows about this problem," she said, telling the two dozen or so gathered that she recently lost a grandson to substance abuse. Jackson said successfully tackling area substance abuse often depends on who is in office in Gallup or Window Rock.

"We must look at it together," Jackson said. "Otherwise, people will continue to suffer." Jackson urged Luján to do what he could to secure continuous funding for NCI. She said curing people from things like alcoholism and drug abuse involves more than just locking them down for 72 hours.

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Mayor Jackie McKinney agreed. McKinney assured those present that the city was behind making progress at NCI. "This is a public health crisis," McKinney said. "I think we all know how serious this issue is."

Foley noted the receipt via the 2016 state Legislature of \$500,000 of a behavioral health investment zone bill that was signed by Gov. Susana Martinez. He said he didn't know how much of that would trickle down to Gallup, noting that Gallup isn't the sole community in New Mexico with substance abuse needs.

Sen. George Muñoz, D-Gallup, noted that years ago his father, former mayor Ed Muñoz walked to the Roundhouse in Santa Fe to highlight Gallup's substance abuse woes. Muñoz said the message his father took to Santa Fe years ago hasn't changed.

"There has to be something for people to advance into once the detox period ends," Muñoz explained. "People have to move into jobs and employment and go on to lead productive lives."

Over the years, NCI was funded, and was heavily funded by the Navajo Nation, but that funding dwindled from millions to nothing at one point. The city owns the Boyd Avenue land in which the non-medical and crisis intervention center (NCI) sits.

State Rep. Patricia Lundstrom, D-Gallup, a member of the New Mexico House of Representatives since 2001, was part of the oversight committee that created NCI in the 1990s. As a state legislator, she has been out front in securing hundreds of thousands of dollars in funding for the facility over the years.

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