

President Nez meets with Albuquerque FBI Division

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WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez met virtually with the FBI's Albuquerque Division on Oct. 3 to help improve communication, coordination, and data collection between the Navajo Nation, the FBI, and the families of missing persons. Nez was joined by Navajo Nation Division of Public Safety Executive Director Jesse Delmar, Chief of Police Daryl Noon, Criminal Investigations Director Michael Henderson, Chief Prosecutor Vernon L. Jackson, and Washington Office Executive Director Lashawna Tso.

In meetings with the families of missing persons, Nez noted that often family members do not receive adequate updates from the FBI, which handles and oversees the majority of missing persons cases and major crimes on the Navajo Nation. Often, there is only one point of contact for each family that is able to receive periodic updates from the FBI and at times, those updates are not shared with the other family members. Nez called on the FBI to revisit their protocols so that Navajo families are more informed on the status of missing persons cases involving their loved one(s).

Nez also requested the FBI to meet with and update Seraphine Warren, who is leading a missing persons awareness walk across the country to Washington, D.C., when she arrives at the nation's capital. On June 17, Nez and Henderson met up with Warren as she began the awareness walk and provided as much information as possible regarding her aunt, Ella Mae Begay, who went missing in June 2021 from the community of Tólikan, Ariz.

For the very first time, in May of this year, the Navajo Police Department released a Navajo Nation Missing Persons poster to increase awareness and to help bring missing relatives home to their loved ones. During the Oct. 3 discussion, Henderson stated that the Navajo Nation continues to investigate 72 missing persons cases, the majority of which involve Navajo men.

In the FY2023 Comprehensive Budget, an additional \$500,000 was allocated for the Navajo

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Nation's missing persons unit and \$500,000 for the Proactive Criminal Enforcement Program, which is comprised of K-9 units, the Drug Enforcement Unit, and commissioned police personnel that conduct field operations to uncover and disrupt activities that often lead to violent crimes.

"The Navajo Nation continues to prioritize efforts to bring more of our missing relatives home to their families. It's a challenging task that requires the coordination and cooperation of many agencies and individuals," Nez said.

Nez acknowledged the frustration that many families who are missing loved ones are feeling.

"Over the years, we've met with many families who are frustrated with the lack of communication and findings. There is room for major improvement and that's what we communicated to the FBI during our discussion. We have far too many families who don't have answers and I know they are frustrated," Nez said.

Nez said the FBI and Navajo Police have to continue to use the resources available to them.

"We have to continue working through the issues step by step and using the resources that we have to locate missing persons. In many situations, missing persons are found within several hours or days, but we have a number of cases that remain unsolved for years," Nez said.

In addition to directing more resources and coordination, the Navajo Nation continues to work with its partners to finalize a Tribal Community Response Plan to establish solutions to help find missing persons and to help heal victims and families. The plan will serve to guide the Navajo Nation and its partners to build response capacity, collaboration, and support for missing persons and their loved ones. The plan includes four components including law enforcement response, victim support services, media strategies, and the integration of community-based resources.

Jackson also requested the FBI's support in turning over evidence for major crimes cases that are not prosecuted at the federal level. In many situations, when the U.S. Attorney's Office

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decides not to pursue major crimes cases, the Navajo Nation can step in to pursue charges at the tribal level. However, evidence is not always turned over to the Navajo Nation to establish a case against offenders.

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