



THE NAVAJO NATION

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September 25, 2015
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Vice President Nez Shares Message of Empowerment at COPE Symposium



Vice President Jonathan Nez said families need to get back to basic concepts like sitting down together at the dinner table to have a meal and discuss the events of the day. He said this is especially important now, during a time of suicides across Indian Country. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. September 24, 2015—The 3rd Annual Partnerships in Community Health Symposium is underway at the Navajo Nation Museum.

Sponsored by the Community Outreach and Patient Empowerment, the two-day symposium featured a number of professionals advocating for food sovereignty and the future of Native American youth participating in the effort.

Navajo Nation Vice President Jonathan Nez provided the keynote address, welcoming participants and encouraging their important work.

According to statistics from Partners in Health, there are

more than 26,000 Navajos with diabetes living on the Nation, amounting to 22 percent of the 176,604 people who live on the reservation.

Vice President Nez said the Healthy Dine' Nation Act was an unprecedented initiative for a sovereign government. The two percent sales tax on unhealthy foods across the board was a response to diabetes, he said.

Foods like vegetables and fruit are not subject to any tax, including standard sales tax.

"These tax dollars go directly to the communities for projects like running trails, wellness centers and other healthy initiatives," Vice President Nez said. "This was a grassroots community effort and I appreciate the Council for passing the Healthy Dine' Nation Act."

During their tenure on the 22nd Navajo Nation Council, President Begaye and Vice President Nez both supported the Healthy Dine' Nation Act and voted for its passage.

The food distribution program by the U.S. Department of Agriculture is another area the Navajo Nation is exploring to grow food sovereignty.

"President Begaye and I challenged the USDA to consider Navajo Beef for their products, it's the livestock from our Navajo ranchers. It's also time that we utilize Navajo Agricultural Products Industry to provide the food distribution program produce from their farms," Vice President Nez said.

By utilizing products from NAPI for the food distribution program and canning these foods for distribution is going to create new jobs, he added.

"We grew up with our own foods from our farms and livestock. There was no diabetes until processed foods were introduced. We need to reconnect people with the land," he said.

The preparation of food and its consumption by families is another important component Navajo people must return to strengthen relations.

"We need to cook and eat as a family. It brings a sense of community to those we invite to the table. We need to return back to eating together at the table and having conversations with our young people," said Vice President Nez.

He spoke of the four suicides in Utah recently and said young people are losing hope. We need to have this dialogue and address the suicide epidemic that is happening across Indian Country.

"I am hopeful and I have faith in each of you. The bottom line is really empowering our people. It's a generational thing. It might not happen in our lifetime but the next generation. We need to re-educate our people to self-sufficiency and self-reliance," he said.

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