

Statement by the Diné Hataalii Association

July 13, 2020

As Diné, we have a distinct culture and language, and time-honored wellness and healing system that pre-dates colonial, western health interventions. When the COVID-19 pandemic arrived amongst our people, the Navajo Nation and other agencies launched various mitigation efforts hoping to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus. As COVID-19 rages on, it is becoming more clear that a huge gap exists in the overall response – there is a lack of proposed plans or interventions to address the psychological and spiritual impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our people. Our overall system of care must include ways to deal with such things as mental anguish, emotional distress, complex trauma, and the collective grief this pandemic has brought.

To meet this need, the Diné Hataalii Association (DHA) prepared and presented a proposal to Navajo leadership to utilize the CARES Act funding to educate, share, and promote the teachings of Diné cultural wisdom and ceremonial healing practices. The proposal specifically addressed the mental and psychological anguish, and spiritual health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on our Diné relatives as well as those across the United States, and throughout the world. Unfortunately, the Navajo Nation President and Vice-President initiated a *line-item veto* to completely cut proposed funding for DHA mistakenly claiming that our proposal does not comply with federal guidelines for the use of CARES Act funds. We disagree. As such, we responded to leadership with clear justification that substantiated our eligibility for CARES Act funding. Further, we shared this statement to the public on why we submitted our proposal and why our work is critical during this stressful time.

Since the early 1970s, the DHA has been an organization that existed to protect, preserve and promote the Diné cultural wisdom, spiritual practice, and ceremonial knowledge for present and future generations. DHA is certified and incorporated under the auspices of the Navajo Nation Division of Economic Development business regulatory process and meets all reporting requirements.

Continuing as the original medicine people since time immemorial, the DHA members offer public health support through ceremonial interventions, herbal therapies, storytelling and sharing of cultural knowledge. DHA also provides cultural consultation and technical assistance to local authorities and other entities on health and safety related matters in the age of the pandemic. Diné Be'ezéé' Íl'íní Yee Da'ahótą'ígíí, the Diné Hataalii Association are in reality, the first responders and undeniably essential, front-line public health workers who have always assisted the Navajo Nation. Unfortunately, those who seem to not be in tune with Diné cultural and traditional ways do not understand the role of the DHA and its members in maintaining the overall health and wellness of our people and the Nation.

We question the President and Vice-President's veto of our proposed funding even though the proposal was discussed and vetted extensively before being approved by the Navajo Nation Council. It was noted that our 36-page expenditure plan and budget was more comprehensive than those proposals submitted by the Executive Branch. The President's use of the *line-item veto* gave no alternative option of support; rather, it simply disregarded the offering made by the DHA. To completely ignore our proposal and offer no alternative to work together is action that directly violates the Navajo Nation Fundamental Laws; and, therefore, is an act of disrespect and exclusion for our treasured and rare Diné Hataalii. It leaves us to question why our government leaders feel as though we should not assist in relieving the pain and suffering of our people during the worst pandemic in history, even though we continue to be sought for counsel and assistance.

There were many facets to our proposal, which included programming where traditional and cultural knowledge and information could be shared *via* radio, social media, digital video and other means to reach our youth and those seeking guidance. This is a critical time for Navajo families to listen and hear the primordial cultural and traditional counsel and knowledge. We also included funding to support a series of diagnostic, prevention, protection, purification, restoration ceremonies for the Navajo Nation to be conducted as a source of health intervention to assist our Diné relatives experiencing and recovering from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, we planned to create a fund in each region with structured guidelines on providing financial relief and support to certified Diné Hataaali.

Keep in mind that this pandemic has not only physically and spiritually impacted everyone, but financially as well. Many of our Hataaali and herbalists have had to modify, suspend or postpone their cultural engagements. When all travel came to stop and social distancing mandates were enforced, these practitioners had to restrict or postpone essential, front-line work which has resulted in loss of income and has been the cause of significant financial hardship. Like doctors and nurses, the Hataaali endure overwhelming stress from the demands of their work. Navajo patients with COVID-19 sought care at hospitals and were told to return home to recover; however, those patients often turn to Hataaalis for traditional interventions. While others may have work alternatives, the DHA members (many who are elders) are caught in the unfortunate circumstance of having little-to-no support for their livelihood.

The proposal we submitted to our leaders took much time and consideration with profound deliberation and thought on how the DHA can build a public health approach designed specifically for the distinctive cultural and psychosocial needs of our Navajo people. Our health needs are unique and different from others; therefore, our response to the COVID-19 pandemic must adhere to the uniqueness and differences inclusive of Diné cultural healing interventions and culturally relevant teachings/stories. It is our sovereign authority for the Diné people to institute our own health solutions that meet their unique needs, and to use federal funding to support our culturally relevant methods and tools for healing and restoration toward Hózhó.

Diné Hataaali Association is comprised of leaders and caretakers of Diné traditional cultural wisdom, ceremony, and herbal healing knowledge. We represent the original healthcare system of the Diné. We are invoked with a special purpose in this world to ensure that the Navajo Nation continues its journey towards restoring health, happiness, well-being, balance and Hózhó. We will continue working towards this end as we have always done. Our Diné people have experienced forced colonization for centuries with a resultant loss of knowledge of language, culture and traditional practices among our younger generations. Diné youth should be informed that they have cultural resources and traditions as a source of strength. We did not think that we would need to explain or justify ourselves; rather, we expected Navajo leaders to possess and respect intrinsic beliefs and knowledge of the essential and front-line work we do for and on behalf of the Navajo Nation and its people.