



Navajo Nation Council approves plan to accelerate CARES Fund relief and support through Chapter workforce and online portal

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: October 5, 2020

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — The Navajo Nation CARES Fund Chapter Distribution Expenditure Plan unanimously approved by the 24th Navajo Nation Council (Resolution No. CS-73-20) authorizes \$90 million in expenditures for the 110 local Navajo Nation chapter communities to expedite coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic related expenditures. The plan will be administered through the Office of the Controller (OOC) and the Division of Community Development (DCD) through an online CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) portal to eliminate audit risks and ineligible spending. On Monday, the Office of Management and Budget reported \$50 million has been expended of the more than \$714 million in CARES Act funding received by the Navajo Nation.

“It is imperative that we get this money to the local level for the benefit of our Navajo people. Our chapters are an untapped resource that can assist because they know which community members are highly in need,” said Council Delegate Mark Freeland (Becenti, Lake Valley, Náhodishgish, Standing Rock, Whiterock, Huerfano, Nageezi, Crownpoint), sponsor of CS-73-20. “It is the intent to get this \$90 million to the *hogan* level to assist the neediest of the needy. We are asking our chapters to step up and assist in this huge endeavor that will benefit our people. We ask President Jonathan Nez to sign this legislation into law and begin to get the money spent.”

Council included a detailed listing of allowable expenditures under the plan:

- Personal protective equipment (PPE) like gloves, masks, hand sanitizer, thermometers, anti-bacterial soap, first-aid supplies;
- Essential sanitation items like Clorox, wipes, Lysol spray, toilet tissue, wipes, diapers, adult pull-ups, feminine hygiene, toothpaste, tooth brush, aloe-vera, lotion, shampoo, soap;
- Essential fuel sources like wood, coal, pellets, propane, gas vouchers-fuel, hand warmers, blankets;
- Essential food items like vitamin C, multivitamins for adults and children, water, Gatorade, V-8, Ensure, emergency food care package, blue corn mush;
- Essential services like solid waste removal, solid waste clean-up, porta-johns, support to water haulers, livestock windmills, electric bill assistant;
- Infrastructure projects and upgrades like bathroom additions, planning and design, construction, bathroom equipment, septic services assistance, cistern tanks, water barrels, work place implementation to meet CDC requirements, utility and water infrastructure, water wells;
- Infrastructure equipment such as a backhoe for Covid-19 related decedent matters and other matters of burial/grave digging;
- Emergency essential support like Public Employment Program employee special duty pay, essential pay, bathroom additions construction employee, essential delivery workers, essential heavy equipment operator workers for road maintenance and burial, emergency coordinator;
- Emergency hardship assistance for electric, propane, natural gas, broadband and telecommunication needs and equipment, water heater and solar panel repairs, groceries, senior center utility bills, purchase of food, PPE for elders at senior centers and senior center safety upgrades following ADA guidelines.
- Other allowable expenditures authorized by the federal CARES Act.

Every request for assistance from both Title 26 Local Governance Act (LGA) certified chapters and non-certified chapters would be eligible to receive funding for pandemic response and relief activities. Requests will be evaluated by the OOC and the DCD's Administrative Service Center (ASC), which will facilitate monitoring, compliance and reporting. The ASC will also be responsible for centralizing the procurement of goods and services on behalf of chapters through the online CARES portal.

The resolution states: "The Navajo Nation has determined that immediately providing funding for Navajo Nation Chapters to combat the effects of COVID-19 and mitigate the future spread at the community level is vital in sustaining a comprehensive response to the COVID-19 public health emergency and mitigating the effects of the pandemic."

To date, the Council has appropriated more than \$792,840,991.10 in response funding, including more than \$56 million for local chapter government response funding. That funding was line item vetoed in February and July by the president.

"This system ensures that the high-risk populations, which includes elders, veterans and larger families, have an opportunity to go directly to their local chapters to request assistance," said Delegate Freeland. "This is different than waiting for random and unannounced food box deliveries and is comprehensive, meaning that every chapter will be able to assist with processing these requests, especially for those without access to the internet."

At the Naabik'iyáti' Committee, the Controller explained how the amendments to the plan, which were adopted by the Council, would protect all CARES Funds from misuse by centralizing the assistance request system.

To assist in administering the CARES Funds, the Council also authorized 2.9 percent of the total CARES Fund to pay for the proper management and administration of the \$714 million. That allocation to the Office of the Controller amounted to \$20,008,798, and includes the development of an online portal to facilitate all assistance requests in a transparent manner.

This authorization for funding to expand the capacity of OOC to handle CARES Funds is the second time Council identified and approved the \$20 million following the president's line item veto of the first allocation in August.

All payments would be generated from the Navajo Nation CARES Fund and would be carried out through the centralized system. Chapter governments may make decisions regarding the expenditures, which includes the ability to establish a hardship assistance program for those registered with the chapter.

Delegate Freeland stated, "I think that's real important. That way, chapters are able to log on to the portal system and establish the request for the funds. That way, it alleviates our chapters from any sort of federal single audit situations."

Any unspent funding under the resolution and the expenditure plans on Nov. 30 will automatically revert to the Navajo Nation CARES Fund Hardship Assistance Program first established through Navajo Nation Council Resolution No. CJY-67-20.

The Council also acted to inject \$15 million to immediately fund wireless towers, backhaul, system upgrades, middle mile and last mile services for companies that serve areas of the Navajo Nation not covered by tribally-owned enterprises. That funding will also support fiber and microwave infrastructure to schools, chapter houses, government facilities and businesses in addition to 4G upgrades for services like FirstNet, Amber Alert, NG911, telehealth, education and commerce applications for mobile and homebound residents.

The support for non-tribally owned eligible carriers is the second time the funding has been approved following the president's line-item veto of the first allocation.

The legislation (No. 0197-20) was approved by the 24th Navajo Nation Council by unanimous vote of 21 in favor and 0 opposed. The legislation was sponsored by Delegate Freeland and co-sponsored by Council Delegates Charlaine Tso (Mexican Water, Tółikan, Teec Nos Pos, Aneth, Red Mesa), Eugenia Charles-Newton (Shiprock), Pernell Halona (Coyote Canyon, Mexican Springs, Naschitti, Tohatchi, Bahast'á'a'), Vince R. James (Jeddito, Cornfields, Ganado, Kinłichii', Steamboat) and Speaker Seth Damon (Bááhaalj, Chichiltah, Manuelito, Red Rock, Rock Springs, Tséyatoh).

Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez has until Oct. 10 to enact the legislation into law or issue a regular or line item veto.

The Budget and Finance Committee (BFC) of the Navajo Nation Council will conduct a review throughout October of all CARES Funds previously approved for projects. BFC will also recommend the reversion of allocated CARES Funds for reallocation by the Council.

“Our deadline to expend these funds is Dec. 30th and our chapters are willing and capable to step up and expend these funds,” said Delegate Freeland.

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