



25th Navajo Nation Council

25TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Naabik'iyáti' Committee considers confirmation of Navajo Department of Health Director



Left to Right: Council Delegate Andy Nez and Kim Russell the Acting Director of the Navajo Nation Department of Health

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — Last Thursday, the Naabik'iyáti' Committee deliberated Legislation No. 0083-24, which seeks to confirm the Navajo Nation President's appointment of Kim Russell to serve as the Director of the Navajo Nation Department of Health (NNDOH).

Legislation sponsor Council Delegate Dr. Andy Nez said the service and delivery through NNDOH impacts every community across the Navajo Nation and afar.

"I've worked on several initiatives within upper District 13 with the Navajo Division of Health," Delegate Nez said. "I was happy to sponsor this legislation confirming the appointment of Director Russell based on the initiatives that we've worked on together, coming to fruition."

Kim Russell, originally from Chinle, Ariz. and a graduate of Northern Arizona University with a degree in Biology, shared her extensive background in health administration and Indian health care and articulated her vision for the Navajo Nation's health infrastructure.

Naabik'iyáti' Committee members raised numerous concerns and questions regarding accountability, strategic planning, and the need for stronger communication between various offices and agencies.

Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty stressed the necessity for clear written plans to ensure accountability and measurable progress. She highlighted gaps in communication between the Office of the President and Vice President (OPVP) and the Legislative Branch, as well as the lack of position and policy statements and recommendations from NDOH.

Council Delegate Eugenia Charles-Newton inquired about Russell's specific plans for the upcoming year, reiterating the need for measurable outcomes. Council Delegate Helena Nez Begay addressed the need to strengthen policies on elder abuse and improve staff training in nursing homes.

The Naabik'iyáti' Committee members also expressed concerns with existing Navajo health care facilities and communication issues with NDOH's staff, calling for improved infrastructure for hospitals, more effective staff communication, and addressing insurance lapses for senior center vehicles.

Health, Education, and Human Services Committee (HEHSC) Chair Vince James voiced his intention to vote against Russell's confirmation, citing lack of collaboration in working with HEHSC.

"Your department's oversight is HEHSC," Chair James said. "You're not working with your oversight and that's a big problem between us. We have so many concerns with NNDOH and we've come to you to try and resolve these issues."

Delegate James said that the change in presidential administrations often causes directors to pass unfinished projects on to the next administration, much of which could be remedied with strengthened communication between the department and legislative oversight.

"You don't just serve at the pleasure of the President and the Chief of Staff. You need to work with your oversight committee," Chair James added.

Russell highlighted her commitment to creating a positive work culture and addressing the needs of the community, including crisis centers, rehabilitation facilities, and elder care services. She emphasized the importance of establishing the Office of the Medical Director within NNDOH.

"I appreciate the discussion and questions from my colleagues" Nez added, "It allows for good reflection and future planning."

The Naabik'iyáti' Committee voted 18 in favor and one opposed to refer Legislation No. 0083-24 back to the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee for further review within 30 days. The Navajo Nation Council serves as the final authority for the bill.

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