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Air is Life Act of 2021 Signed into Law

Historic Commercial Tobacco Free Largest Tribal Initiative First

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz.—At the Veterans Park on Saturday the Níłch'í éí bee iiná-Air is Life Act of 2021 was signed into law by the President and Vice President of the Navajo Nation.

“This is a long time coming,” President Jonathan Nez said to the crowd. “You didn’t have to worry about me because we have been fighting for this legislation for over a decade. You know about Vice President and I, and Delegate Walker’s stance on health and wellness on the Navajo Nation. We want our people to live a long and healthy life.”

The Air is Life Act of 2021, an elaborate health policy, will create a commercial tobacco free environment for all public places, the four Navajo casinos, pow wows, annual festivals, as well as sports and rodeos.

The Air is Life Coalition will lend its assistance to the Navajo Nation for the implementation that will require signage for indoor facilities in both English and Navajo.

“We have been working on this law for many years and here we are today. I am deeply grateful,” Dr. Patricia Nez Henderson said in Navajo. “Sixteen years ago, a group of very small people came together in a small office space in Winslow,” she said as they received their first grant from the Center for Disease Control to reduce smoking and smokeless tobacco. The small group began by working with the traditional healers and the Navajo communities on the Navajo Nation.

The Air is Life Act of 2021 was initially cosponsored by Council Delegate Daniel Tso, and Speaker Seth Damon, joined later by Council Delegate Carl Slater and Council Delegate Nathaniel Brown. Dr. Henderson acknowledges Council Delegate Thomas Walker, Jr., who attended Saturday’s signing ceremony as a primary supporter of their efforts.

“Our greater history rooted in traditional belief always points to the number four,” Council Delegate Thomas Walker, Jr. said. “On the fourth time we were given favor—a blessing for the health of the nation.”

The Navajo Nation Council successfully passed a law in 2008, eliminated smoking in public places. It was vetoed by President Joe Shirley, Jr. as he cited unfunded mandates, infringement on traditionalists, and negative impacts on gaming gross revenue receipts.

The effort was repeated the following year in 2009, yet as Council Delegates added amendments to exempt gaming from the proposed legislation, Council Delegate Thomas Walker, Jr. invoked a measure from the floor that legislatively killed the bill.

In 2011, a proposed legislation was reintroduced, but a legislative tactic was used on the floor as the bill was copied and language added that exempted casinos. The mirrored bill successfully passed the Navajo Nation Council. President Ben Shelly vetoed the law citing his support for a more complete law.

A public referendum was attempted in 2018, but the signature requirement of 20 percent of all registered voters of nearly 120,000 was overwhelming for the limited time that was available.

“This deeply sacred moment is shared by so many individuals from Navajo chapter houses, past and current Navajo leaders, physicians, scientists, public health policy professionals, and above the Navajo people,” Dr. Nez Henderson said following the event. “Our heart of gratitude is extended to the Diné Hathali Association, Azee’Bee Nahagha of Diné Nation, and the Navajo Medicinemen Association.” Dr. Nez Henderson also acknowledges the significant contributions from the American NonSmokers' Rights Foundation, the Arizonans Concerned About Smoking, the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, the American Cancer Society, and American Lung Association.

She further added, “The Air is Life Act—Niłch’í éi bee iiná Beehaz’áannii—is a living document that will, as our elders would say, make a lasting impact in our lives. From this new law, life is given. Our youth will adapt healthy lifestyles; our children will have new opportunity.”

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