



24th Navajo Nation Council

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Del. Henio Hosts U.S. Census Director to Experience First-hand the Barriers of Counting on Navajo



To'Hajiilee Chapter President Mark Begay (at left) explains how many elders in remote areas on the Navajo Nation only speak Navajo. Listening, from the middle, is Navajo Council Delegate Jamie Henio, Vice President Myron Lizer, and U.S. Census Director Steven Dillingham.

TO'HAIJILEE, N.M. — The director of the U.S. Census Bureau in Washington, his key staff, Council Delegate Jamie Henio (Alamo, Ramah, Tóhajiilee), Navajo Nation Vice President Myron Lizer, representatives from the offices of New Mexico U.S. Sens. Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich, and U.S. Rep. Debra Haaland (N.M.-Dist. 1), and others, gathered at the To'Hajiilee Chapter House to discuss how to improve the accuracy of the New Mexico census count by providing the bureau's decision makers a first-hand account of the state's unique challenges they will encounter while doing the census.

Arbin Mitchell, a tribal partnership specialist with the U.S. Census Bureau, told the committee he wants to see the Navajo Nation establish partnerships with IHS and schools to help relay the message of the census.

“I’ll be working with the Complete Count Commission and those are the folks that are going to make it easy for us to reach the people that need to be reached,” Mitchell said.

Delegate Henio serves on the commission and represents To’Hajiilee Chapter. He was host to the census delegation along with Chapter President Mark Begay.

“There was a profile study done that showed there are more than 300,000 Navajo that were identified and counted; 49 percent remain within the boundaries of the Navajo Nation, the others are from off the Nation,” Delegate Henio said. “Then there are some who may be a quarter Navajo but don’t identify themselves as being Diné. We have larger barriers like that to overcome.”

The group traveled about 12 miles west of To’Hajiilee along a winding dirt road thru mesas and small canyons to the home of Daniel Piaso to experience first-hand the challenges of counting individuals in geographically remote areas, where challenging road access, lack of broadband and phone connectivity, mailing address issues, and language barriers are common.

Steven Dillingham, director of the U.S. Census Bureau asked questions to Piaso, who speaks only Navajo, about how many domiciles were on his property.

“Another challenge especially for the elderly is the language barrier. Some only speak Navajo, and they do not trust strangers who might approach them asking questions about the census,” Mitchell said.

The final stop for the group was at the Canoncito Band of Navajos Health Center Inc., a 638-contract health center located in the To’Hajiilee community. At the center, the group discussed the importance of an accurate census count for the community. The health center is a place Mitchell said he wants to partner with to give patients and their families information about how important the census was and to expect census workers to be in the area during the census.

“The To’Hajiilee community resides in Bernalillo County but its post office and zip code is in Cibola County—how does this currently impact the U.S. Census?” said Maria Clark, CEO of the health center. “The To’Hajiilee community needs its own post office to better align with congressional districts and its county seat.”

The Navajo Complete Count Commission will receive a report on the visit with Census Bureau officials and the congressional delegation at its first meeting on June 2 at the Budget and Finance Committee conference room in Window Rock at 10 a.m.

The commission meets quarterly and will discuss developing a budget and media campaign for next year’s decennial census at the June 2 meeting.

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