



Office of the Executive Director

Navajo Division for Children and Family Services



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DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY SERVICES CONFERENCE FOCUSES ON FAMILY VIOLENCE

The Department of Family Services under the Navajo Division for Children and Family Services (NDCFS) hosted a two-day Family Violence Conference September 29-30 at Navajo Technical University in Crownpoint, N.M.

The conference featured presentations on Domestic Violence Effects on Native Children, Spiritual Stress Relief, Domestic Violence and Expectant Mothers, and a Domestic Violence Survivor's Story.

In opening remarks, Sonlatsa Jim, Deputy Director of NDCFS, said the modern-day monsters that the Diné Action Plan (DAP) is working to address – violence, substance use disorder, suicide, and missing and murdered Diné relatives – are interrelated and the DAP data shows that alcohol is one of the root causes of the monsters.

To advocate for change, empower and strengthen our children, families, and communities by providing quality, holistic, cultural, and value-based services.

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She invited more participation in the DAP. “Domestic violence impacts all of us in one way or another. There are not enough people and resources out there to help all those victims and survivors. We need more volunteers,” she said.

The NDCFS leads the efforts to implement the DAP, which seeks solutions to address the four modern-day monsters. The Department of Family Services serves on the DAP’s task force on violence.





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Elaine J. King, Community Involvement Specialist, gave an overview of domestic violence. She said domestic violence is a learned behavior about power and control. Judgment is often passed on victims, especially because victims often find it hard to leave an abusive relationship due to various factors, King said. She said that focus should be on changing the behavior of an abuser, rather than blaming of the victim.

“Our children are watching. They’re learning what they’re watching,” she said. King said she holds parenting classes to teach about communicating with children and the importance of rules. She said the Department of Family Services has also been focusing on teaching people to devise safety plans due to scarce resources on the Navajo Nation.

Lorena Halwood, of the Ama Doo Alchini Bighan (ADABI) in Chinle, Ariz., spoke about effects on children.

“Children know domestic violence is in the home,” Halwood said. “Children who witness family violence are affected in ways similar to children who are physically abused. They are often unable to establish nurturing bonds with either parent. Children are at greater risk for abuse and neglect if they live in a violent home.”

Halwood said that in 2024, ADABI assisted 485 female victims, 49 male victims, and 1,006 children. The majority of the children are male, she said. She reiterated that domestic violence is a learned behavior.

“Children are sponges. They soak up everything that is being said,” she said. “Those that see and hear violence in the home suffer physically and emotionally.” Children who grow up in homes with violence grow up thinking that is normal and the behavior is repeated, she said.

Children exposed to family violence are more likely to develop social, emotional, psychological and/or emotional problems, Halwood said. Children who witness domestic violence also show more anxiety, depression, anger, and lower self-esteem than children who don’t witness domestic violence in the home, she added. These can result in a variety of issues including confusion; becoming withdrawn or aggressive; high-risk behavior; truancy in school; and feelings of shame, abandonment and helplessness, to name a few.

The trauma they experience can show up in behavioral issues that continue to adulthood, she said.

Halwood encouraged families to gather in harmony and prioritize talking with and spending time with children. Children also need guidance and boundaries, but discipline should not be used as punishment, she said.

Althea James, Victim Witness Advocate, presented on Domestic Violence and Expectant Mothers. Her message was that the effects of intimate partner violence have significant impact on the unborn, which can result in lifelong challenges after they are born.



The presentations were reflected in the testimonial by a survivor of domestic violence. Marisa Rico shared her story and how she utilized the Family Harmony Program, under the Department of Family Services, to overcome challenges with domestic violence and alcohol.

“I wouldn’t be standing here if it weren’t for that program. Every time I share my story, I heal every time. I found my voice and I have my strength back,” she said.

Since overcoming her challenges, Rico has co-authored a book and is featured in a documentary on survivors who thrive after leaving abusive relationships.

King praised Rico’s willingness to tell her story. “She’s probably saved a lot of lives,” King said.



Service providers, including Division of Behavioral and Mental Health Services, Navajo Health Education Program, Center of Harmony and Recovery, and the Department for Self-Reliance, set



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up tables to provide information and were given the opportunity to present on the services they offer during the conference.

The Department for Family Services reminds everyone that October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Throughout the month, the Department's Crownpoint office will be taking part in events to raise awareness about domestic violence and its effects. On October 7, they will be conducting awareness outreach at Bashas' in Crownpoint; on October 15, they will participate in the homecoming parade; on October 16, they will participate in the Domestic Violence Awareness Conference at Crownpoint Chapter House; on October 17, they will conduct awareness outreach at the Crownpoint High School homecoming; and on October 31, they will be at the Crownpoint flea market for trunk or treat.

For more information, please call (505) 786-2237.

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