Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

Media Contact: Ayres 202-343-7435
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Four Navajo Indian tribal officials are in the lobby of the U. S. Department of the Interior building in Washington, D. C., this week to exhibit crafts produced under the Navajo Work Experience Program -- a tribal effort which provides constructive jobs and a pay envelope to people who, would otherwise have to depend upon welfare checks.

Begun nine months ago, the program has already provided 1,700 Navajos with jobs, a number expected to double within the next year. It operates across the reservation from the rim of the Grand Canyon eastward to Shiprock, New Mexico.

The exhibition includes rugs, jewelry and handcrafted souvenir items as well as photographs illustrating construction and other community improvement projects accomplished under the work experience program.

The four Navajos accompanying the exhibit are Mrs. Elizabeth Beyal, director of the Navajo Tribal Work Experience Program; John Francis, assistant director; Mrs. Joann Pinto, acting director of the Navajo Public Services Division; and Richard Beyal, Navajo Tribal Community Worker.

In welcoming the exhibit to Washington, D. C. Commissioner of Indian Affairs Louis R. Bruce said today: "We look upon your achievement in operating a successful work experience program as an example for other Indian tribes to follow. It is self-determination on the part of Indian people at its best."

The Navajo Work Experience Program works this way: The Tribe, through its local chapters (tribal subdivisions), develops work projects considered necessary to help local community development. Unemployed but employable tribal members are assigned by the tribe to jobs on these projects.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs turns over to the tribal officials the money which would have been paid in assistance grants to these jobless workers, plus an additional $30 monthly as a work incentive. The tribe then pays each worker what he would have received in assistance, plus an additional $30. The payment is not identified as welfare supervising the work.

The most popular tribal work projects involve the construction, improvement and repair of individual homes. Other vital projects are road repair, fence repair, corral improvement) hauling and chopping wood for elderly and disabled persons, improvement of water and sanitation facilities, arts and crafts, adult education, and provision of assistance in Navajo schools and hospitals.

One task performed under this program unique to the Navajo reservation is the construction of hogans, traditional Navajo homes. Some Indians prefer them because they are solidly constructed and provide warmth in winter and coolness in summer, others because they represent their culture, which they wish to retain. More than 100 hogans have been built under the Navajo Work Experience Program.

The program director, Mrs. Beyal points out that there have been benefits from it in addition to the jobs produced.

"By becoming involved in a work project a man on general assistance has taken the first step toward gaining self-respect in the eyes of his children and neighbors," she explained. He develops self-esteem and self-determination and sets an example for impressionable youngsters. By helping his neighbor, he is instrumental in establishing a stronger community."

She cites the example of a tribal elder physically unable to work who contributed a cultural point of view to the Indian children of a Greasewood, Ariz. school. He tells stories of the Navajo tribe and its traditions to groups of Indian school children who come to hear him in a hogan near the school.

Most popular among the training opportunities under the Work Experience Program is instruction in reading safety signs and the English alphabet-- requirements under an Arizona driver: licensing regulation. Basic English and health education are also popular.

Classes are conducted after hours in public and BIA schoolrooms, in Navajo chapter houses, and in Federal, State, and local government facilities. In the Chinle area, some of the teachers in the program are from the Navajo Community College, the only college to be operated by Indians and to be on an Indian reservation.

Tribal work experience programs similar to the Navajo, but on a much smaller scale, have been in operation on a number of Indian reservations for over two years. There are now 23 such programs throughout "Indian country".

One of the first programs was on the Papago reservation in southern Arizona. It now employs about 500 workers and is next in size to the Navajo project.

In fiscal year 1969, a monthly average of 500 people eligible for welfare help from the Bureau worked on tribal work experience programs. In fiscal year 1970, that figure rose to 775. With the addition of the Navajo and other programs, about 2,900 Indians who otherwise would be on Bureau welfare roles are now working.