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### **NAVAJO NATION COURTS CELEBRATE ANNIVERSARY**

The Judicial Branch of the Navajo Nation celebrates on April 1, 2021, its 62<sup>nd</sup> anniversary as an independent judiciary.

The Branch usually holds Justice Day activities throughout the month of April to commemorate the creation of the Navajo court system. However, due to the public health emergency of the pandemic, Justice Days will not be held this year.

“The Judicial Branch extends gratitude to all our naa’táani, present and former, who never laid down the vision for finding solutions for justice. Ahé’hee to the Judicial Branch employees for their dedication, hard work, and tenacity in providing the essential services for the Navajo Nation during this time. Heartfelt expressions of gratitude are given to the frontline warriors who have fought for our safety and health in a challenging time which is confronting our people,” said Chief Justice JoAnn B. Jayne.

Traditionally, and before there was a formal court system, the Navajo people used a dispute resolution process of talking things out among all those affected and coming to a decision together with a local leader chosen by community consensus. This process is recognized in the Judicial Branch’s Peacemaking Program, which continues to offer peacemaking services for those who voluntarily wish to utilize the traditional process.

The modern day court process for the Navajo people had its beginnings at Fort Sumner when the people were imprisoned there. The people were divided up into groups each headed by a headman or chief, the naat’áanii. The naat’áanii handled less serious offenses within their groups. The more serious crimes were handled by the Fort Sumner commander.

Once the people returned to Diné Bikéyah, the first Indian Courts – the Courts of Indian Offenses – were created by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1883. Thereafter, the Navajo Courts of Indian Offenses were created. When the states began asserting jurisdiction over tribal courts, the Navajo Tribal Council enacted a resolution effective April 1, 1959 that created the Navajo Nation’s own court system.

The Navajo Nation now has a two-tiered court system that includes 11 judicial districts and a Supreme Court that hears appeals. The judicial districts include district and family courts. The Judicial Branch also includes the Peacemaking Program, Probation and Parole Services, and Judicial Conduct Commission. The Administrative Office of the Courts provides administration and technical support to the courts and programs.

While the pandemic has severely affected operations of all governmental programs, the Navajo Nation Judicial Branch courts and programs are essential and have continued to offer services throughout the pandemic. While doors to judicial facilities have remained closed to the public for protection of court staff and the public, the Judicial Branch continues to provide access to the justice system through remote systems for filings and hearings. Courts and programs continue to be accessible by telephone and/or email.

On this anniversary of the Navajo Courts, judicial employees are training on the Roadmap to Full Capacity intended to provide greater safety for essential services and future reopening of doors to the public with best practices.

The Navajo Nation Judicial Branch celebrates the creation of the Navajo Nation Courts today and asks the public to continue to be vigilant in preventing the spread of COVID-19.

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