

**HEALTH ADVOCATES WILL NOT LEAVE CASINO
WORKERS BEHIND:
GAMING & TOBACCO INTERESTS SPREAD FALSEHOODS
TO WEAKEN LEGISLATION**

Window Rock, Arizona-- “We will not give up. While we are disappointed that the Gaming Industry took advantage of efforts to protect the health of Navajo people, we remain more energized than ever,” said Dr. Patricia Nez Henderson, a Navajo tribal member and the Vice President of the Black Hills Center for American Indian Health. “Every life is sacred. **TEAM Navajo** wants real commercial tobacco-free legislation that protects the health of every Navajo worker, including casino workers. But the Gaming and Commercial-Tobacco Industries worked hand in hand to convince our delegates to support weaker legislation.”

TEAM Navajo, a group of health advocates and organizations, is working to pass strong tobacco-free policy, taking commercial tobacco out of all workplaces and indoor public places on the Navajo Nation. Similar legislation passed in 2008 with strong council support, but was vetoed by the Council President.

When the Commercial Tobacco-Free Act of 2009 was introduced today, TEAM Navajo felt more education was needed before the final vote, so they asked their supporters to “kill” the bill. During the past two months the bill made its way through seven Navajo Nation Council committees where several amendments were introduced to exempt gaming facilities and leave casino workers exposed to secondhand smoke. **TEAM Navajo** agreed a casino exemption would not only weaken the legislation, but would continue to put casino workers at serious risk. **“We do not support any bill that would leave casino workers behind. There is so much evidence that links secondhand smoke to chronic diseases including cardiovascular, cancer, heart, and respiratory diseases.”** said Dr. Nez Henderson, “Yet many of our leaders continue to listen to an industry that has been known to lie and cheat and our leaders still are willing to risk the

lives of our own people. As health advocates, we value the life of every human being whether they work in a casino or other Navajo business.”

“Above all, we are pleased that the Council did not pass weak legislation today. We will continue to work with tribal leaders on this important health issue. **Every** person on the Navajo Nation has the right to breathe smoke-free air in public and work places.” said Dr. Nez-Henderson. “Unfortunately, many Council Delegates have been convinced that that a strong commercial tobacco-free policy would reduce business revenues—a myth developed and perpetuated by the tobacco industry. We know that is not true. We know that the Navajo people support a strong law.”

A poll conducted this year indicates that **91% of Navajo people support making workplaces free from commercial tobacco use**, with no exemption for casinos. “**TEAM Navajo** is fighting for the health of all Navajo people. We will not leave any workers behind,” added Nez-Henderson. “This legislation was originally written to protect all Navajo people, but commercial tobacco and gaming industry interests prevailed. If the legislation was amended to leave out casino workers, the original intent of the legislation would have been shattered. We would not have been able to accept that. Exempting gaming facilities forces our people to choose between their jobs and their health,”

According to the Institute of Medicine’s recent report there is compounding evidence that secondhand smoke increases the risk for cardiovascular diseases. The report underscored that any exposure to secondhand smoke can increase heart attacks among nonsmokers by 20-25%. In 2006 U.S. Surgeon General’s Report on *The Health Consequences of Involuntary Exposure to Commercial Tobacco Use*, approximately 3,400 lung cancer deaths and 46,000 heart disease deaths occur annually among adult non-smokers in the United States as a result of secondhand smoke.

“Our leaders need to understand the importance of these findings. We do not have to wait 10-15 years to make a change in our environment. The original legislation with no exemptions would have protected the health of all people. But we will never support a weak law that exempts casinos. TEAM Navajo will not leave any person behind. In the next year we plan to provide more education to the Navajo leaders and communities. **In addition, we work with our communities to assure that we elect tribal leaders that make health a top priority**” said Dr. Nez Henderson.