

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

NTUA details significant progress on Navajo Nation CARES Act projects

November 18, 2020 Paul Ciampoli

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In the Four-Corners region of the United States, the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority (NTUA) has been busily working towards a December 30, 2020 deadline to extend, build, connect, and provide utility services to hundreds of families funded through Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

In mid-August, the Navajo Nation -- the recipient of CARES Act funding -- announced the award of \$147,116,561 to NTUA to construct utility projects eligible under the CARES Act with the goal and purpose of combating COVID-19. The various NTUA projects are identified in the Navajo Nation CARES Act legislation. These projects must be completed by December 30, 2020.

NTUA is grateful that the Navajo Nation Council passed the Navajo Nation CARES Act legislation and that the Navajo Nation President signed the legislation authorizing the connection of over 500 homes of Navajo families to the electric grid. NTUA further noted that in anticipation of the approval of the Navajo Nation CARES Act, it had been organizing internally to connect hundreds of homes. In an effort to connect as many families as possible NTUA's electric construction crews started working five ten-hour days per week starting in June.

By starting to connect families before the Navajo Nation awarded CARES Act funding to NTUA, NTUA took the risk that the Navajo Nation might not fund NTUA with CARES Act funding as was being proposed at the time.

"We did this with complete faith that Navajo leaders would approve Navajo Nation CARES Act dollars for electric construction," NTUA General Manager Walter "Wally" Haase said. "If we waited until September to start construction, over 100 families would not have been connected this year."

"We didn't want to take that chance," Haase added. "We want to help as many families as possible to help fight the spread of this devastating COVID-19."

In June, NTUA presented a proposal to extend electricity to 510 homes, which includes 350 families that NTUA was prepared to connect during the 2020 Light Up Navajo II project (LUN II). The Light Up Navajo initiative, which was supported by a \$125,000 grant from APPA's [Demonstration of Energy and Efficiency Developments](#) (DEED) program began in Spring 2019, bringing together volunteer crews from public power utilities across the country to connect Navajo homes to the grid.

NTUA and 34 public power utilities were ready to connect the 350 homes in April 2020; however, the COVID-19 pandemic [delayed plans](#) for LUNII. Rather than having the 350 families wait until Spring of 2022, NTUA submitted their homes for funding from the Navajo Nation with CARES Act funding. Many of the LUN II homes were shovel ready with all the necessary Rights of Way and land acquisition approval in place.

"We wouldn't have had these LUN II projects ready if we didn't have our sister utilities on board," Haase said. "Even though they didn't travel here, they made it possible for LUN II families to be connected. Their initial commitment resulted in a meaningful difference in the lives of these families."

NTUA plans to launch another Light Up Navajo project as soon as it is safe to do so. “We want to echo NTUA’s thanks and encourage utilities to continue reaching out if they are interested in participating in the next LUN event,” said Alex Hofmann, Vice President, Technical and Operations Services, at APPA.

Progress Reports

In weekly progress reports for Navajo Nation leadership, NTUA provides updates on the various CARES Act projects. In Update #11 of November 12, 2020, NTUA noted that in order to help combat the spread of COVID-19, it created partnerships with the other electric service utilities that serve small regions on the Navajo Nation.

As part of the Navajo Nation CARES Act legislation, NTUA was authorized to install off-grid solar units across the Navajo Nation. NTUA initiated a public campaign inviting families without electricity to apply for a solar unit.

NTUA received more than 1,000 applications and many are from families living within close proximity to a power line. In addition, some of the families are living beyond the reach on NTUA’s electric distribution system.

NTUA therefore reached out to the electric companies that serve applicants living in these areas, including Arizona Public Service, Continental Divide Electric Cooperative, Jemez Mountain Electric Cooperative and Socorro Electric Cooperative to find ways to partner to connect these families to the electric grid. NTUA will use CARES Act funding to fund the connection of a minimum of 31 homes served by these companies.

“We used the blueprint of Light Up Navajo as a guideline. I was inspired through the generosity of our sister utilities during LUN to find and create new partnerships,” Haase said. “This is the first time NTUA has established such a partnership with these neighboring electric utility companies. We reached out because of the success of LUN and now we have another unified effort to help families get connected.”

Dual Purpose -- off-grid solar units and electric grid connections

As of November 12th, NTUA crews have been working to prepare qualified homes to be connected to the 3,000-kW solar units, energy efficient refrigerators come with each unit, and have determined that:

- 199 homes are feasible to date; Installation of solar units is scheduled to begin the week of November 16th
- 134 homes will need house-wiring
- 65 homes are awaiting house-wiring inspection

NTUA continues to work with the Navajo Nation to obtain land acquisition for construction. The Navajo Nation Land Department has issued NTUA land acquisition for 117 projects, moving these projects closer to construction.

NTUA Districts and Electric Construction line crews have worked 10-hour days. Various crews are building power lines on weekends and holidays.

As a result of these efforts, 358 families are now connected to the electric grid, an increase of 36 homes from the week.

Moreover, NTUA connected 29 homes in two days following the completion of two major power lines that extended over 10 miles.

As for electric capacity projects, NTUA’s electric division has completed 27 out of the 59 planned CARES Act funded projects. There are 17 projects in construction, including Kinlichee (AZ), Kayenta (AZ), Shiprock (NM), and Mexican Water (UT).

Additional projects are set to begin construction later this month in Fort Defiance (AZ), Crystal (NM), Navajo Mountain (UT), and Chinle (AZ). The work will include substation work and pole replacements.

The complete week #11 Update is available [here](#).

To continue to follow NTUA’s progress, please look for the weekly Updates at www.ntua.com on the CARES Act – NTUA projects page.

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