



# THE TRUTH WELL TOLD *Independent*

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## NTUA: 7K Navajo homes need bathrooms or plumbing

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**CHURCHROCK** — Seventy-six-year-old Louise Johnson made a plea for help in her cellphone voicemail message.

“My name is Louise Johnson. I live in the Superman Canyon (area). I need food and words.”

Earlier this year, when the pandemic hit the Navajo Nation, she found herself unable to leave her home to go to town for groceries and other essentials for fear of being exposed to COVID-19.

On Thursday, Johnson told the Independent that since she recorded the message in late March or April, her family and friends have been delivering goods to her home, a one bedroom hogan without a bathroom or running water located in rural area northwest of Churchrock known as Superman Canyon because that’s where scenes of the 1978 “Superman” movie were filmed.

“I heard it on the radio. They advised us to do that,” Johnson said about the idea of recording a request for help on her voicemail. She has not deleted the message, despite her brother’s request, because the number of Navajo elders dying from COVID-19 continues to increase, and she feels she is still at risk and does not know when the crisis is going to end.

Johnson’s needs go beyond “food and woods.”

At 76, she takes sponge baths and uses an outhouse for her necessities. Her biggest challenge is water. Even though her hogan was built approximately 50 feet away from a waterline, she has not been able to connect the structure to the line because she lacks a

bathroom, one of the requirements for the Indian Health Service to connect the home to plumbing.

According to Churchrock Chapter records, Johnson applied for financial assistance with the Churchrock Chapter to build a bathroom in 2018. All 110 Navajo chapters have an annual budget to assist community with home repairs and bathroom additions.

LaVera Morgan, the Churchrock Chapter community service coordinator, said the chapter went through a management transition and has had several community service coordinators in the past few years, which has delayed the chapter membership’s requests for various types of assistance.

Morgan said since Johnson’s plights were featured in the media earlier this year, the chapter passed an emergency resolution to immediately grant Johnson’s request and she was awarded about \$3,000 to pay for lumber and other materials to build the bathroom addition. She also told the Independent three volunteers, two of whom had construction experience, offered to assist in building the bathroom.

The project is still in the works. Johnson said she visited the chapter recently to find out what’s going on and was told not to worry, that “it’s being taken care of,” she said.

Morgan said she is working with the Navajo Engineering Construction Company on getting Johnson’s bathroom and plumbing. She added Johnson is one of about 300 families in Churchrock in need of a bathroom.

### Churchrock needs bathrooms

“About 50-60% of our families need bathroom additions,” Morgan said. “The majority of the families need

bathroom additions or new bathrooms because their systems are old and their septic tanks collapsed or their bathroom fixtures got depleted. Some of these homes or bathrooms were built back in the day, when bathroom construction was not efficient or they used to cut corners.”

The cost to build or replace a bathroom varies, but the chapter typically awards \$3,000 per member in need of assistance for lumber and material. Funds, however, are limited and awarded based on priority and need.

Rex Kontz, Navajo Tribal Utility Authority deputy manager, told the Independent in May that about 15,000 homes on the Navajo Nation lack running water for different reasons that include the lack of a bathroom or plumbing.

“After unofficial inquiry I understand roughly 50 percent need plumbing,” he said. “But some also need an addition to create space for a bathroom or what is referred to as a bathroom addition. ... Some homes may have been pre-plumbed when built and some may be mobile homes that came with plumbing.”

### IHS on bathroom additions

Jenny Notah, public affairs liaison with the Navajo Area Indian Health Service, said IHS can provide bathroom plumbing for homes when the agency is constructing water and sewer facilities at those homes. But the burden lays on others.

“Bathroom additions must be built by either the homeowner, the chapter, the Navajo Nation, or by others,” she said in an email to the Independent Tuesday. “When IHS can fit bathroom plumbing, which usually includes a sink, a toilet, a shower-tub and a hot water heater, in a home without an addition, then we do. However,

many older homes and hogans typically do not have room in the existing home for bathroom plumbing. When a bathroom addition is necessary, the IHS typically coordinates with the homeowner and chapter on the need for bathroom additions long before a water/sewer project begins in order to give the homeowners and chapters time to build the necessary bathroom additions.”

Notah said for homes that are not yet on a funded IHS project for water and sewer, the number of homes on the Navajo Nation needing bathroom additions is estimated to be 681 homes.

“For homes currently on the funded projects list, an overall count is not available; however, an estimated 400 homes may need or are in the process of getting bathroom additions,” she said.

So far this year, IHS, in coordination with the Navajo Engineering and Construction Authority, has installed approximately 88 homes with plumbing, including toilets and shower/tubs, according to Notah.

“COVID-19 has impacted the NECA plumbing progress this year,” she said. “A full suite of bathroom plumbing fixtures costs about \$5,000 per home. Bathroom plumbing is a project-by-project cost (i.e., some have more, some have less) and is part of a larger IHS water and sewer project. However, plumbing can sometimes account for as much as 20% of the overall project cost. Based on this estimate, and based on the FY 2020 IHS budget appropriation, the (IHS) plumbing budget in FY 2020 was about \$5.2 million.”

### Navajo Nation on bathroom additions

Members of the Navajo Nation Council recently voted on legislation to allocate \$3.5 million in CARES Act funds