

Navajo casino employees might stop receiving paychecks

Written by Administrator
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Window Rock, Ariz. • More than 1,000 people who work for the Navajo Nation's gambling enterprise have been told to prepare for the possibility they will not receive paychecks while on administrative leave.

The tribe's three casinos in northwestern New Mexico and one east of Flagstaff, Arizona, have been shuttered since March 17 because of the coronavirus. But the 1,180 majority Navajo employees have remained on the payroll with benefits.

Brian Parrish, Navajo Nation Gaming Enterprise interim chief executive, said a final decision on layoffs will come over the weekend.

"It's not a sure thing the layoff is going to occur, but we wanted to err on the side of caution," he said.

Parrish said the enterprise is running low on cash reserves, putting its sustainability at risk. It has submitted proposals to tribal leaders for a share of federal virus relief money that went directly to the tribal government. But tribal lawmakers are unlikely to make an immediate decision on how to allocate the remaining money.

Payroll represents about 70% of the fixed costs for the gambling enterprise, Parrish said.

Loans from the federal Paycheck Protection Program covered employee payroll for nearly half of the 19 weeks that the casinos have been closed, Parrish said. He wouldn't disclose exactly how much the enterprise received, but data released by the U.S. Treasury Department showed a range of \$4.7 million to \$11 million for four loans.

A skeleton crew that includes security, engineers and some management will remain working, Parrish said. Any employees who aren't being paid will continue receiving health benefits, he said.

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Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez extended the closure of tribal executive offices this week to mid-August, citing recent surges in cases off the reservation. The gambling enterprise has fallen in line with the executive orders.

Tribal officials reported 50 new confirmed cases of COVID-19 late Thursday and one additional death ahead of a weekend lockdown. The total number of people infected on the reservation stood at 8,734 with 432 known deaths.

Health officials said 75,775 people have undergone testing and 6,481 have recovered from the virus.

The weekend lockdown that includes the closure of businesses begins after sunset Friday and lasts until early Monday morning. The tribe also has implemented daily and nighttime curfews.

Residents of the reservation that extends into Arizona, New Mexico and Utah have also been under a mandate to wear masks when out in public.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough that clear up in two to three weeks.

But for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia and death.

Read more <https://www.sltrib.com/news/2020/07/25/navajo-casino-employees/>