

Wellness Hotel Program gets funding until end of January

Written by By Kevin Opsahl Sun Correspondent
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Gallup's Wellness Hotel Program got a financial shot in the arm by county commissioners on Jan. 4 to keep housing homeless people who are at risk of contracting coronavirus.

One hundred twenty-five thousand dollars will be split between a Days Inn that houses approximately 50 individuals and the contractors that provide support for the program, according to Debra Martinez, manager of Gallup's Behavioral Health Investment Zone, which focuses on ways to help residents live a healthy life.

"It's very important," she said of the funding, before noting the program is, "potentially saving lives."

Anthony Dimas, Jr., McKinley County manager, said the money was approved to be used until Jan. 31 or until the \$125,000 is spent, whichever comes first.

"We're being good neighbors to help them," Dimas said, noting that the county provided \$350,000 to help the program from October to December 2020.

The WHP was established by the City of Gallup and McKinley County early last year, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the U.S. Those eligible for rooms at the Days Inn must be experiencing

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homelessness, over the age of 65 — with some exceptions — and capable of independent living. Residents are screened for temperature and symptoms daily and if they are suspected of having coronavirus, they're sent to another hotel for isolation and quarantine. The city, however, is not in charge of that hotel, Martinez said.

The WHP houses families and individuals ranging from the age of 1 to 83. Though it includes only 45 people right now, at its peak there were over 60, according to Martinez.

Martinez said she and another staffer have other jobs besides ones with Gallup and the WHP is “a big undertaking” and “we just don't have the capacity” to keep it going.

The \$125,000 came just as the program is about to take a different form in a new location — the historic Lexington Hotel in downtown Gallup.

Gallup City Manager Maryann Ustick told the *Gallup Sun* the county funding was important to provide a “bridge” between when federal funding for the Wellness Hotel Program ran out and when the newly-renovated hotel can open.

After the meeting, County Commissioner Billy Moore confirmed Ustick's comments.

“Rather than lose the momentum that they have going, the county has offered to step up and provide the funds to keep it going for another month,” he said.

Ustick said the Lexington Hotel had been purchased by the city two and a half years ago, when the CARE 66 Foundation gave it up. But the building was in disrepair and the city simply “kept the utilities going.” More recently, renovations have been going on and it's hoped that by Feb. 1, the Lexington will be permanent supportive housing.

Moore explained why he thinks the Wellness Hotel Program is significant.

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“This time of year, with the cold weather and everything, I think it’s important we provide opportunities for people to get out of the weather, to have a place to sleep,” he said. “This has been a big concern for McKinley County and the Gallup area for a number of years.”

Ustick called the Wellness Hotel Program “critically important.”

“When the pandemic hit, we found that our homeless population was terribly at risk and so we ended up having community spread among our homeless population,” she said. “It was very clear that we had to do something to help prevent them from catching COVID-19 on the street.”

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