

## Lujan leads Gallup meeting on behavioral health

Written by By Bernie Dotson Sun Correspondent  
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### Funding still necessary to tackle problem

One of the first things one noticed when walking into the April 11 stakeholders meeting on how to best go about combatting Gallup and McKinley County's substance abuse problem is that area professionals area ready and willing to work toward education and prevention.

But to really get at things, funding is key. That, in part, was the consensus that came out of a 90-meeting called by U.S. Rep. Ben Ray Lujan, D-N.M., and held at the Gallup-McKinley County Student Support Center.

"This is to get the various behavioral health professionals together and talk about what the problem is from various standpoints," Lujan said. "This is about how we can work together to give the best support that we can. I thought we heard some very worthwhile collaborative feedback today."

Gallup's Behavioral Health Investment Zone received \$500,000 last year, an amount matched by the city. But there developed a shortage of additional funding when a bill put through the

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legislature got vetoed by Gov. Susana Martinez. At the time, Martinez noted that administratively funding the bill was best — as opposed to putting the financial onus on the state legislature. The end result was a allocated split of \$1 million between Rio Arriba and McKinley counties. The former consistently has the highest number of drug related deaths in New Mexico on a yearly basis.

“It’s something that communities everywhere struggle with,” Emma Muhammad, a behavioral health specialist from Zuni Pueblo, said during the meeting. “This was a good meeting to at least talk about and address the issues.”

David Conejo, chief executive officer at Rehoboth McKinley Christian Hospital, said RMCH is in the midst of instituting a comprehensive program on substance abuse treatment, housing, transportation and job search.

“We’re making the focus emergency shelter and work rehabilitation,” Conejo said. “The goal is to integrate people back into the community to the point of self-sustainability.”

Lt. Billy Padavich of the Gallup Police Department said such substance abuse is definitely a problem throughout Gallup and McKinley County. The local drugs of choice are heroin and methamphetamine, Padavich told the little more than dozen panel members gathered.

“Sometimes the majority of calls we get are drug-related,” Padavich said. “A lot of times the people in question are taken to NCI and then get out and are back at it again.”

Ken Collins, the former executive director at the San Juan Center for Independence, has worked at RMCH since February. He handles the job search component for what RMCH’s behavioral health component seeks to do.

“You have to help people find jobs once they shake addiction or substance,” Collins said. “Recovery is only part of the process.”

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McKinley County Commissioner Bill Lee pointed out that Martinez recently vetoed SB 47 that would have broadened the 911 Good Samaritan Law immunity to cover individuals who are on probation/parole, ensuring those in need of help will request it without fear of legal repercussions. New Mexico has the highest drug overdose rate in the United States for most of the past two decades. Expanding the 911 Good Samaritan Law to cover people who are on probation or parole would have helped improve emergency overdose responses and save lives, the bill's supporters claim. "Of course the passing of that bill would have helped," Lee said. "These are tough times."

Mary Lindenmeyer of Gallup-McKinley County Schools said students at McKinley County schools are vulnerable to substance abuse.

"I think social networks have to be in place as part of the prevention methods," Lindenmeyer said. "We can't overlook students who are on the verge of addiction."

Lujan said a follow up meeting would take place in a couple of months. The meeting was the second such meeting spearheaded by Lujan in Gallup since December 2016.

***By Bernie Dotson***  
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