SEARCHLIGHT NEW MEXICO is a nonpartisan, nonprofit news organization dedicated to investigative and public service journalism in the interest of the people of New Mexico. Our mission is to deliver high-impact investigative reporting to inspire New Mexicans to demand action on systemic problems that plague our state. We believe that great reporting can motivate all New Mexicans to confront racial and economic inequities, government corruption and negligence, and abuse.

searchlightnm.org
THOUGHTS ON TURNING 5

AS THIS MAGAZINE GOES TO PRESS, Searchlight New Mexico is celebrating an important milestone: We turn five years old on January 20.

It’s been a long, sometimes tumultuous journey, driven by a commitment to social justice that doesn’t always yield the expected. Investigative journalism is funny that way. When in 1906 Upton Sinclair wrote “The Jungle,” his best-selling exposé of the Chicago meatpacking industry, he imagined that it would propel the country toward socialism. Instead, American readers recoiled in horror at the thought of what they might be eating. “I aimed at the public’s heart,” Sinclair famously said, “and by accident I hit it in the stomach.”

Okay, Searchlight’s reporting hasn’t yet led to anything quite so dramatic as the Pure Food and Drug Act (passed in response to Sinclair’s muckraking). But it’s had a lot more impact than I once would have thought possible. In the space of five years, our stories have triggered at least 17 state government — most notably (but not exclusively), Brian Blalock, secretary of the Children, Youth and Families Department. And along the way, Searchlight has helped fix the resignation of several of the most powerful leaders in those departments — this directive has come from the highest office in state government.

Of course, it’s not just Searchlight that’s been targeted. Our staff writer, Ed Williams, has been focusing his attention on this very troubled child welfare agency ever since he began working for Searchlight in 2018. This year, he built on that expertise in a partnership with ProPublica, analyzing hundreds of emergency calls, police records and officers’ lapel camera videos to paint a detailed picture of an unseen crisis. When he interviewed officials at CYFD, they insisted that shelter placements happened only in the rarest of circumstances. His reporting, excerpted here, proved that wasn’t true.

All the stories in this issue cry out for your attention. They detail massive wildfires, devastated communities, dried-up wells and parched acequias, and an exodus of mental health workers from a state with a desperate and growing need for care. They vividly illustrate the implosion of public education and rising homelessness — topics that might not be pretty but that we ignore at our peril. The grandeur of New Mexico is like a Ming vase, gorgeous beyond description yet filled with cracks. Searchlight’s stories not only reveal the cracks — they point out how those cracks might be filled.

Reading between the lines of these stories, you may notice something else. Call it a refusal, a disdain, even, by New Mexico authorities to comment, answer reporters’ questions, respond to requests for interviews, comply with public records laws or provide accurate data. That’s one thing that hasn’t changed in five years, from a Republican governor to a Democratic one.

To say we’re disappointed is an understatement — but it also misses the point. Four years ago, a contingent of Searchlight editors and reporters visited the Roundhouse in the immediate aftermath of Michelle Lujan Grisham’s inauguration as governor. Her communications team reassured us that a new era of transparency had begun. And they grinningly informed us that when they moved into their new office space, they discovered a Post-it note still taped to the wall. “Do not talk to NPR or Searchlight New Mexico,” it read.

I don’t know about NPR, but from what we can discern, that order hasn’t been lifted for Searchlight. During the past year, our reporters have been repeatedly stonewalled and rebuffed in their attempts to cover state government — be it CYFD, the Public Education Department, the Department of Health, the Department of Corrections, the Department of Human Services … the list goes on and on. According to a source — a recently retired staff member from one of those very departments — this directive has come from the highest office in state government.

Of course, it’s not just Searchlight that’s been targeted. News organizations throughout New Mexico — and the country — are routinely frustrated and blocked from reporting the news that makes democracy work. You might think I’m getting to be a broken record on this topic. And you’d be right. I touched on it in last year’s magazine. But I harp on it because transparency is truly the lifeblood of a functioning society. When the free press is stonewalled by our elected officials, freedom suffers.
CONTRIBUTORS

SARA SOLOVITCH is executive director and editor of Searchlight New Mexico. During her 40-year career in journalism, she has published investigative and long-form stories in Esquire, Wired, Politico and The Washington Post. As a staff reporter at the Philadelphia Inquirer, she covered education, courts and special projects. A former health columnist for the San Jose Mercury News, Sara has traveled throughout New Mexico and Alaska while reporting for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation on health care in underserved areas. Her book “Playing Scared: A History and Memoir of Stage Fright” was published by Bloomsbury in 2015.

AMY LINN has written about social issues and child well-being throughout her career, starting at the Miami Herald and including work for the Philadelphia Inquirer, San Francisco Examiner and Bloomberg News. She was the recipient of an Alicia Patterson Journalism Fellowship to write about teenagers on death row; the resulting stories appeared in The New York Times and other publications. Amy has been an editor at Outside Magazine, Wired and the San Francisco Chronicle, where she was an associate national editor. She has also freelanced for national magazines and been a case investigator for the Montana Innocence Project.

MICHAEL BENANAV is a writer, photographer and digital storyteller based in northern New Mexico. In addition to Searchlight, his work appears in The New York Times, The Christian Science Monitor, Sierra Magazine, and other publications. He is also the author of three books, most recently the award-winning Himalaya Bound: One Family’s Quest to Save Their Animals — And an Ancient Way of Life. Visit his website at www.michaelbenanav.com.

SHAYLA BLATCHFORD is a documentary and commercial photographer, grew up in California with little exposure to her Navajo heritage. After moving to Santa Fe in 2011, her interest was sparked and she began a journey to establish a connection with her ancestors and their ways of living. That interest propels much of her work to this day. Her work can be viewed at www.shaylablatchford.com.

JOSHUA BOWLING, Searchlight’s criminal justice reporter, spent nearly six years covering local government, the environment and other issues at the Arizona Republic. His accountability reporting exposed unsustainable growth, water scarcity, costly forest management and injustice in a historically Black community that was overrun by industrialization. Raised in the Southwest, he graduated from Arizona State University’s Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication.

ANNABELLA FARMER came to journalism while studying at the Institute of American Indian Arts. She worked with High Country News as an intern, and contributed research support and consulting for the Polk Award-winning Land Grab Universities project.

LINDSAY FENDT got her start in journalism covering the environment for The Tico Times in San José, Costa Rica. She covered human rights, immigration and the environment throughout Latin America before moving to Colorado in 2017 for the Scripps Fellowship in Environmental Journalism at the University of Colorado. She worked as a freelance before joining Searchlight and is finishing a book about the global rise of murders of environmentalists.

Raised in the northern New Mexican village of Truchas, ALICIA INEZ GUZMÁN has written about the history of place, identity, and land use in New Mexico. She brings this background to her role as education reporter at Searchlight, where she focuses on the lived experiences of New Mexico’s students and the role that equity and cultural literacy should play in the classroom and educational policymaking. In 2021, she won the Sigma Delta Chi Award from the Society of Professional Journalism. The former senior editor of New Mexico Magazine, Alicia holds a Ph.D. in visual and cultural studies from the University of Rochester in New York.

As an intern and Bradlee Fellow at The Washington Post, VANESSA G. SANCHEZ covered education, local government and politics in the Baltimore-Washington region. She joins Searchlight as a Roy W. Howard Fellow, covering health care in New Mexico.

DON J. USNER retired as Searchlight’s staff photographer in April 2022. Born in Embudo, N.M, he has written and provided photos for several books, including “The Natural History of Big Sur,” “Sabino’s Map: Life in Chimayó’s Old Plaza,” “Valles Caldera: A Vision for New Mexico’s National Preserve” (winner of a Southwest Book Award); and “Chasing Dichos through Chimayó” (finalist for a 2015 New Mexico-Arizona Book Award). His photographs were featured in the photography journal Lenswork and in an online blog of The New Yorker.

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LINDSAY FENDT has specialized in local and community news photography and videography since graduating from the University of Missouri in 2017. He has worked at newspapers across the country, including the Colorado Springs Gazette, Carrollton Times-Georgian, Wyoming Tribune Eagle and Laramie Boomerang.

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AT 4:15 P.M. ON APRIL 6, a team of wildland firefighters stood on alert near a rocky ridge just northwest of Las Vegas. The spot in the valley was breathtaking, full of ponderosa pine and jagged stone outcroppings. Hermit’s Peak — a dramatic craggy mountain crest — loomed overhead.

The crew was standing guard over a prescribed fire when an order came over the radio, directing them to head downslope where embers had jumped outside the containment lines. In the minutes that followed, the winds shifted, the flames spread and all the fire engines ran out of water. At 4:50 p.m., U.S. Forest Service officials declared that the prescribed burn had become a wildfire.

In future retellings of New Mexico’s 2022 wildfire season, many will distill the story to this moment, the instant that the Forest Service lost control of the Hermit’s Peak Fire, which would later combine with yet another escaped prescribed fire to become the largest in state history.

But while the Forest Service lit the proverbial match on Hermit’s Peak, the fire’s true origins traced back to thousands of missteps over the centuries. From overgrazing and logging in the late 1800s to fire suppression in the decades since and inaction on climate change today, America’s institutions have contributed to the deterioration of forests across the West.

Here in New Mexico, forests remain subject to political inaction and economic whims. The state has become a major contributor to climate change, thanks to a booming oil and gas industry, located principally in New Mexico’s portion of the Permian Basin, the highest greenhouse-gas producing oil region in the country. The state reaped more than $1.7 billion in oil and gas revenue in the first four months of 2022 alone.

Under the status quo, scientists expect large swaths of New Mexico’s forests to die off in the next several decades, as drought and fire convert vast groves of ponderosa pine into shrubland, watersheds dwindle and wildland communities are consumed by fire.

THE AGE OF CONSEQUENCE

By Lindsay Fendt | Photos by Nadav Soroker | October 21, 2022

These windfalls come at a time of increasingly severe wildfires, mass tree die-offs and the incineration of more than 1,000 structures, including hundreds of homes in the state this year.

“The bill has come due,” said Craig Allen, a leading researcher and ecology professor at the University of New Mexico. “We are now in the age of consequence.”

Under the status quo, scientists expect large swaths of New Mexico’s forests to die off in the next several decades, as drought and fire convert vast groves of ponderosa pine into shrubland, watersheds dwindle and wildland communities — many of which date back centuries — are consumed by fire.

In April, after another major blaze, the McBride Fire, destroyed 207 homes and killed two people in Ruidoso, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham offered cautions of her own.

“There is going to happen all around the state, and we have to be prepared.”

Ecologists and government officials say interventions may stave off the worst. The only question is whether the government, the business sector and private landowners will act swiftly to protect what remains.

“We’re not going to be able to save all the forests from catastrophic fire, and unfortunately, we’re going to lose many homes,” said Zander Evans, executive director of Forest Stewards Guild, a nonprofit organization based in Santa Fe. “But even saving some is a worthwhile goal, and we know how to do that.”

A ‘MAN-MADE DISASTER’

On April 22, eight large wildfires were burning across New...
and forage rather than as an ecological necessity for a
game to see wildfires as major threats to assets like timber
stands. And as intensity fires; logging removed the large fire-tolerant
trees, reshaping the ecology of Western forests. And as
length fires usually remained beneath the canopy.
her studies of tree rings have
found that fires typically burned in the Jemez about once
centuries later.

In the old forests, ponderosa pines grew larger and har -
peratures. The heat stresses trees, stunts their
growth and leaves them vulnerable to disease, predators
and death.

Insects like bark beetles also love the warmer weather,
which allows them to survive and reproduce for longer
periods. During hot summers, they target weak, drought-
tolerant trees, killing them in enormous numbers. The hot
air continually pulls water from their lifeless husks and
from live trees as well, until the forest reaches moisture
contents similar to kiln-dried lumber.

The devastation helped push the Healthy Forests Resto-
ration Act through Congress in 2003, creating guidelines
and fire-reduction incentives for at-risk areas. The act,
among other measures, instructed communities to cre-
ate Community Wildfire Protection Plans that expanded
prescribed burning and forest thinning programs.

Yet funding and critical resources stagnated. By 2012,
foresters estimated that less than 10 percent of U.S. com-
munities at risk for wildfire had created a CWPP.
The potential for what this type of work could accom-
plish was on display back in April as Swetnam watched
the Cerro Pelado fire sweep north toward Sierra de los
Pinos, a neighborhood of about 200 houses. The commu-
nity had already evacuated in preparation for the worst
and, watching the flames, Swetnam thought it would surely
come.

But as the fire approached the outskirts, it reached a
patch of forest that had recently been thinned. Swetnam
watched in surprise as the smoke faded from black to
gray, then white, and flames dropped from the treetops
to the ground before moving east toward thicker fuels.

It’s now widely believed that forest thinning saved
Sierra de los Pinos from ruin. According to Swetnam, what
he saw from his deck is one of the best examples of what
needs to be done to stop wildfires from consuming New
Mexico’s forests.

It’s possible to reduce the risks. It won’t be easy.
And it’s going to take decades.”

— TOM SWETNAM

And though it has the fifth most forested land of any
state, New Mexico has one of the least-funded and least-
staffed state Forestry Divisions in the nation, with 72
full-time staff members. By comparison, Colorado and
Georgia, which have comparable amounts of forest,
have 120 and 191 full-time staff, respectively.

Nearly 5 million acres in New Mexico need thinning,
prescribed burns or weed management on a rotating cy-
cle, according to the state’s 2020 Forest Action Plan. It’s
target that New Mexico isn’t even close to reaching.

NEW MEXICO’S FOREST FUTURE

Today, fires that used to be considered unprecedented
are becoming the norm, a situation that’s worsened by
rising temperatures. The heat stresses trees, stunts their
growth and leaves them vulnerable to disease, predators
and death.

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Fires are too severe, the trees aren’t always able
to recover, studies show. Left unchecked, wildfires are
expected to wipe out many of New Mexico’s pine forests.

“You’re not going to get trees reestablishing for hun-
dreds of years, if ever, especially as the climate continues
to warm,” Swetnam said.

There is a glimmer of hope that more forest resilience
work is on the way — work that can slow the downward
spiral. Earlier this year, the U.S. Forest Service named the
“Enchanted Circle” — 1.5 million acres of the Carson Na-
tional Forest in Taos, Colfax and Mora Counties — as a
priority for wildfire resilience work and dedicated $11.3
million to the effort.

The federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of
2021 and the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 also provid-
ed infusions of cash, offering about $10 billion for forestry
and wildfire risk reduction.

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Today, there are at least 4,200 unsolved cases of missing or murdered Indigenous people, including women, men and children, according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs.
agencies have yet to launch a comprehensive national tracking system and crimes against Native women are underreported, overlooked and misclassified. The toll is staggering: An estimated 84 percent of Indigenous women experience violence in their lifetime. Desperate to find their loved ones, families turn to social media and launch their own grassroots efforts to search for the vanished.

Searchlight New Mexico caught up with Warren on the morning of June 30 in Edgewood, New Mexico, east of Albuquerque. What follows are excerpts from a conversation held over a 15-mile walk, edited for length and clarity.

WARREN: IN HER OWN WORDS

“Walking in the heat, the rain, none of that has been that difficult. The difficult part has been if I meet a family and they tell me their story, I feel like I can’t help them because I feel like I’m looking for the same help they’re looking for. And I keep thinking about that over and over, and sometimes it makes me want to give up. Like, why am I even doing this, when this other family’s been waiting five years [to find out what happened to their loved one]. Am I going to be waiting five years? Nineteen years? Thirty-five years?

I mean, what can we do to help them? And I feel all this on me, and I have to pray. I have to acknowledge all of creation, and as soon I’m done acknowledging everything along the way, I always feel better. I didn’t know I took a lot of things for granted before. I have a nice house, I have my kids, and I could go missing tomorrow.

WHY I’M WALKING

There’s a lot of reasons why I’m walking. It’s kind of a symbol of how slow the process is of getting answers, of making change. I could go from here and fly to D.C. and nobody would talk to me. No one would take me serious. But right now, this walk gives everyone a reason to see and know what I’m going through. It seems like the only way to get something done.

Right now there’s people who are going to try to set up a meeting with [Interior Secretary] Deb Haaland, and

In the wee hours of June 15, 2021, Ella Mae Begay vanished from her home on the Navajo Nation, near Sweetwater, Arizona.

She was 62 years old. Within days of Begay’s disappearance, a person of interest was named in the case and local search parties were scouring the roadsides and arroyos near Sweetwater. But more than a year into an investigation by Navajo law enforcement and the FBI, no arrests have been made. Begay still has not been found.

Concerned that she would become yet another overlooked statistic amid a nationwide crisis of violence endured by Indigenous families, one of her nieces took to the streets. Literally. Last year, Seraphine Warren walked 120 miles from Sweetwater to Window Rock to try to get some answers, and some help, from Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and the tribal council.

This summer, the 41-year-old Warren (belonging to the Edgewater clan, born for Red Running Into Water, with a maternal grandfather from the Mud people and paternal grandfather of Red House) is marching from Arizona to Washington, D.C.

Her purpose is at once political and personal. She is driven by anger — and fear — about the disturbingly high rate of missing and murdered women on the Navajo Nation and around the country. She is gripped by frustration at the slow pace of her aunt’s investigation. She hopes that her footsteps will inspire real action to solve these problems — and help muster the resources needed to find Begay. Equally, she’s motivated by her own need to simply do something. Even though she’s not sure she’ll be able to bring change to her community, she hopes her cross-country odyssey can at least bring her to a place of peace.

Today, there are at least 4,200 unsolved cases of missing or murdered Indigenous people, including women, men and children, according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The true total is significantly higher. Accurate figures aren’t available, however, because law enforcement

Herbert Stash, her zeedí (cousin-brother), followed in a support vehicle, keeping Warren fed, hydrated and blister-free as she attempted to cover 20 miles a day, through summer heat and monsoon rains.
it’s only because I’m walking … Even so, probably while I’m doing this walk they’ll put me on a pedestal and then they’ll treat me like shit. They’re going to say that I’m the first Native woman that’s walked to D.C. and they’ll invite me to all of these things, but they won’t do anything about why I’m walking.

I treat this walk as a ceremony, as one long prayer walk. The staff that I carry, it’s kind of like a corn stalk, and it has the four worlds carved into it. It represents that for protection. And those ribbons tied to it are prayers from families who have loved ones that are missing. And this dress is what you would wear for some ceremonies.

WHAT’S THAT BABY CRYING ABOUT?
One time an old lady was watching one of my livestreams and I was talking about my feelings, and I always cry. And I guess she heard me cry and she asked someone, “What’s that baby crying about?” — in Navajo that’s how you say it, “my baby”— and she heard the story of what happened to my aunt, and she saw I was walking to the president’s office. And at that time I used to just wear pants, and I guess she thought, “She’s not getting any respect because she’s wearing pants. She needs to dress like a lady.” Her daughter makes dresses, so she told her daughter, “Make her a dress. Make her beautiful. And then they’re going to respect her.” So she was the first one that made me a dress. She gave me three of them, because of that elderly grandma. The belt, the medicine bags, they’re all for protection. Before, you’d just see me in my hard hat and work boots. I’m an ironworker, putting rebar in bridges.

I don’t like talking to most reporters anymore, even though I want to get my story out. Because all you hear is, “Oh she walked this long, and it’s for her aunt.” But they don’t even talk about the whole picture. President Nez comes out and he makes front-page news, and he ends up looking good, but they never go back over there — leave them alone. So they [the elders] told us, “Why are you searching?” because that’s against their belief. We tried to tell them, “So what do we do? Just leave her out there?”

It tested our beliefs so bad. Prayers weren’t working. It was so hard. I understand why they didn’t want us looking for remains. If you’re going to actually walk in beauty, you have to let go of things, and when you go back to revisit it, you’re bringing back all that bad stuff. It affects your mind and heart. But then again, for someone to just go and do this to my aunt… How are we going to walk in beauty when someone can just so easily do this?

WATCHED BY SPIRITS
When it’s really quiet and you’re just in your thoughts, you can hear people walking, like footsteps. I’m pretty sure there are spirits that are being sent to look over me. I think about if others are walking with me, maybe some of those who are missing. So every day I dedicate my walk to certain people, certain families who have someone missing. I dedicated one day to Ashlynne Mike, that little girl [age 11, later found murdered] who went missing from Shiprock, and I just felt like running. I wasn’t supposed to run, because I herniated my T-12 and had two surgeries, so they told me not to run — but I ran. And the next day I walked for Pepita Redhair [a 27-year-old Navajo woman who disappeared in Albuquerque in March 2020].

WALKING IN BEAUTY
A lot of people have this on-and-off switch to missing and murdered. You put it in the back of your head or you find something to keep your mind busy from it. Me, I feel like every day I wake up and I think about my aunt and how — I don’t know if I should say how lucky I am that I’m still here? And she doesn’t get a chance to live and enjoy her family and everything she used to do … My auntie, she was a master rug weaver, she wrote words into her rugs — you could tell her mind was always at peace when she wove because of the way her rugs turned out at the end.

We have elderlies, we have traditions and beliefs that they live by. And in our culture, we are not allowed to go to gravesites. Once someone passes away, they tell you never to go back over there — leave them alone. So they [the elderlies] told us, “Why are you searching?” because that’s against their belief. We tried to tell them, “So what do we do? Just leave her out there?”

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“HURT PEOPLE RAISING HURT PEOPLE”

A mental health crisis grows in New Mexico amid a dire lack of services.
BY ANABELLA FARMER
PHOTOS BY NADAV SOROKER | MAY 25, 2022

To protect families’ privacy, parents have been identified by first names and children by an initial only.

CRYSTAL G. HAS ALWAYS KNOWN that New Mexico’s mental healthcare system is broken. Her aunt, who helped raise her, began showing schizophrenic tendencies at the age of 14. Her mother struggled with substance abuse and went into rehab when Crystal was six. The little girl was put in the care of her grandparents who, for the next two years, made a weekly four-hour round trip from Silver City to Las Cruces to get her to a therapist. It was the closest help they could find.

Since then, Crystal has seen different therapists — “That’s almost a therapist for every year I’ve been alive,” she said, describing the revolving door of providers who suddenly closed their practices, stopped taking her insurance or made hasty diagnoses that would haunt her for years to come.

Today, she looks back on her childhood as an iteration of the pattern lived by thousands of families across New Mexico: “Just generations of hurt people raising hurt people.”

At 33, she is determined to do better by her own daughter. Crystal adopted M at age 5 after learning that the girl’s biological mother — Crystal’s aunt — had, during her own mental health crises, repeatedly endangered the child. M, now 8, worries that she too might end up with schizophrenia one day. It’s not an altogether irrational fear: Schizophrenia has a strong genetic component. But as Crystal often tells her, it’s possible to live well with a mental illness if you have the right support.

M munches on watermelon from her spot at the kitchen table, while her mother, Crystal, works from home. Two years ago, M was thriving under the care of an amazing therapist. But when school reopened in March 2021, so did the floodgates of stress.

M developed an eating disorder. “She would tear little pieces of paper off her book and start eating it,” Crystal said. “We went through her books and over 50 of them have been damaged — one was completely ruined.” It was around the same time that Crystal discovered M’s beloved therapist was soon to retire. Crystal immediately began the search for a replacement, calling dozens of providers across Grant County. She felt like she was reliving her own childhood.

“Crystal and I, there are no providers available for my daughter right now,” she said. “There’s like an eight, 10, 12-month waiting list for children. That’s terrifying as a parent.”

It’s a terrifying prospect throughout New Mexico, where families wrestle with endless waitlists, poor insurance coverage, limited and out-of-date information, and the fact that there simply aren’t enough providers to go around. For every school psychologist in the state there are 3,673 students; the National Association of School Psychologists recommends a ratio of 1:500. And just like Crystal 20 years ago, children across New Mexico are traveling hundreds of miles for a one-hour session with a therapist.

A PARALLEL PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a national emergency in children’s mental health, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Children’s Hospital Association. Suicidal thoughts, gestures and attempts have skyrocketed, as have rates of depression, anxiety, trauma and loneliness. Emergency departments across the country are overflowing with self-harming youth — many of whom are camping out in ERs for lack of inpatient and intensive outpatient treatment.

The problem is acute in New Mexico, which historically ranks among the worst in the nation for overall child well-being. Poverty, suicide, depression, substance abuse. These ills are widely known across the state. New Mexico’s long-standing dearth of mental health care for children and youth has reached a boiling point, according to providers, guardians and kids themselves. Help is harder than ever to come by, with many providers moving to telehealth — inaccessible to patients without internet service and to kids too young to engage via a screen. Other providers have left the field for good, thinning an already threadbare workforce.

“The amount of trauma we’re seeing is much higher than what we’ve seen historically,” said provider Amanda Davison, who reports a 500 percent rise in patient demand from 3,000 sessions in 2019 to 21,000 in 2021.

According to the Hopeful Futures Campaign, a national alliance of 11 nonprofits working to improve mental health services, 58 percent of New Mexico children diagnosed with major depression — 18,000 out of 31,000 — never receive care. A large number of them are Hispanic; according to a 2021 study from Yale University, Hispanic youth are almost three times more likely to experience delays in care than white youth. Indigenous youth have disproportionately higher rates of mental health challenges linked to intergenerational trauma and ongoing discrimination, yet there are few mental health services for tribal communities and even fewer providers who are Indigenous or culturally competent.

Providers say they’re overwhelmed by the demand. Nikka Peralta, a clinical social worker and owner of Mending Hearts, a small trauma-informed practice in Albuquerque, said she turns away two or more people every day. “We are in a mental health crisis here,” she said. “Sometimes I get four calls in a day and I have to tell people that we have a super extensive waitlist. It’s unethical to put somebody on a waitlist for six months.”

“The amount of trauma we’re seeing is much higher than what we’ve seen historically,” agreed Amanda Davison, clinical director and owner of The Family Connection, an outpatient center in Albuquerque. She reports a 500 percent rise in patient demand, from 3,000 sessions in 2019 to 21,000 in 2021. The number of referrals she receives has tripled in that period from 99 to 289, and nearly half are children with depression, anxiety, conduct and anger management issues, and trouble in school.

Educators, economists and policymakers alike have deplored school closures, calling the loss of school-based learning the gravest loss kids have faced during the pandemic. Health authorities see it as a secondary issue to the real crisis.

THE REAL CRISIS

Whatever safety net once existed in New Mexico is long gone. In 2013, former Gov. Susana Martinez wrongfully accused 15 service providers of fraud, abruptly freezing their Medicaid payments and stranding approximately 30,000 New Mexicans without mental health care. And though Martinez’ allegations were eventually proven baseless, the damage was done — many providers closed their doors for good, merged with other agencies or drastically reduced their services. The system hasn’t recovered.

Providers still speak bitterly about the “shakeup” of 2013. Lisa Wooldridge, a counselor in Santa Fe, remembers the chaos and disruption it caused in the mental health community. Many of her adult clients had kids who were seeing a child psychiatrist at one of the agencies affected by the Medicaid freeze. “It puts things into a tailspin,” Wooldridge said. Families were left scrambling to find care for their kids, and some never made it back into the system. Trust had been broken.

“There’s just no infrastructure,” said George Davis, a child psychiatrist and former director of psychiatry at New Mexico’s Children, Youth and Families Department. “You never really end up doing your job because you’re always punting. You’re recommending things that are not in the ultimate best interest of a child, like residential care or antipsychotics, because you’re always in emergency mode.”

Families seeking services often can’t find what they need — even when it’s out there. There is no up-to-date clearinghouse for information. The New Mexico Network of Care, maintained by the state Human Services Division, lists providers who are no longer in practice and lacks basic information, including which providers are taking new clients, the length of their waitlists and insurance coverage. Even professionals in the field have trouble determining exactly what services are available.

“It’s like asking someone to guess how many jellybeans are in a jar,” Davis said. "
The community’s fury runs almost too deep for words, says Antonia Roybal-Mack, a Mora native whose family lost hundreds of acres to the fire. “Really pissed off is literally an understatement.”

In nearly two dozen interviews with people affected by the Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon fire, the same sentiments emerge: The USFS has a history, locals argue, of mismanaging the forest. In particular, they say the agency has limited or prohibited people from the long-held tradition of collecting firewood and other timber, the kind of maintenance the forest needed. If they had been able to tend to it the way they had for generations, they believe the conflagration would have been far less devastating.

“The prescribed burn was the match,” says Roybal-Mack. “But the fuel was there for decades when they wouldn’t let people into the forest to collect vigas or firewood.”

Embedded in the tension is the history of land grants in New Mexico, a system that allowed Spanish settlers, Indigenous peoples and others of mixed descent to obtain tracts of land at the edge of the northern frontier, during Spanish and Mexican rule. From the late 1600s forward, scores of these settlers were granted ejidos, or wildland and forest commons.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, a mostly Anglo cadre of speculators and profiteers began to claim ownership of the commons, using subterfuge and legal loopholes to essentially transfer the forests to private ownership or the federal government. Well over one million acres eventually ended up in the jurisdiction of the USFS, the University of New Mexico’s Land Grant Studies Program estimates.

In today’s fire zone, the descendants of the disposessed are among the Forest Service’s sharpest critics. They are joined in their distress by villagers, small-scale farmers, loggers, foragers of traditional food and medi-

THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE HAS FALLEN SHORT OF ITS COMMITMENT TO THE LAND AND THOSE WHO LIVE ALONGSIDE IT.
the elderly, felt “defenseless and lost,” Regensberg says.

were 40 minutes away in Las Vegas. Everyone, especially

Armageddon,” says Travis Regensberg, a general con-

tic that involves starting smaller fires to deprive a larger

wildfire of fuel.

By flames. The USFS has fallen short of its commitment to

partnering with the USFS, thereby lessening the impacts

of a catastrophic fire. Others criticize the way fire crews

heavily relied on backburning, a fire-suppression tac-

tic that involves starting smaller fires to deprive a larger

wildfire of fuel.

The Santa Fe National Forest, for its part, is commit-
ted to sustaining “traditional communities, their cultures, traditions and values” and to working in tandem with lo-
cal residents, says Julie Anne Overton, spokesperson for
the SFNF, where the Hermits Peak fire started on April 6.
“Collaboration and partnerships will continue to be the
foundation for our work in managing our public lands.”

But so fierce are the emotions and so profound the
losses that Roybal-Mack, a lawyer who now lives in Albu-
quero, expects to file a lawsuit on behalf of hundreds of
plaintiffs, along with the firm Bauman & Dow.

The forests belong to the people, as San Miguel Coun-
ty Commissioner Janice Varela puts it.

“We locals, we feel like, hell yes, it’s our forest,” says
Varela, a long-time water activist. “Yeah, we let the Forest
Service manage it and we let everybody in the world
come here, but it’s our forest. We have ownership from our
proximity to it, from our history and cultural connection
to it, from our heart.”

‘IT WAS ARMAGEDDON’

Chaos ensued when villagers from Mora were ordered
to evacuate on May 2, compounding the distress. “It was
Armageddon,” says Travis Regentsburg, a general con-
tactor who towed his bulldozer in from Las Vegas to cut
fire lines around homes.

The closest command center and evacuation center
were 40 minutes away in Las Vegas. Everyone, especially the
elderly, felt “defenseless and lost,” Regentsburg says.

There seemed to be no one in authority on the ground.

Anger reached yet another height in late May, when the
Forest Service released the news that it was responsi-
ble for the Calf Canyon fire. A botched prescribed burn
in January had turned into a “sleepier fire” that smoldered
for months before leaping to life in April and merging with
the Hermits Peak inferno — also ignited by a prescribed
burn gone wrong.

Back-burning, however, has caused the greatest en-

to fight ferocious blazes, wildland firefighters are
trained to set small back fires to burn grasses and other
tinder, starving the larger blaze of fuel.

In Mora, back-burns were set without private property
lines in mind, says Patrick Griego, the owner of a small log-
mill that he and other locals possess.

A botched prescribed burn appeared one night and back-burned a swath of his
property anyway. He recalls watching, seething and
feeling helpless, as they set his land on fire. The flames
shot 30-feet high in places. Forty acres were gone in 15
minutes, he says.

“I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know what to say.”

He calls the people who set the back-burn “anons.”

Some residents say they’ve felt like sacrificial lambs, losing their land for what was arguably the greater good.

The back-burns, they added, seemed to be excessive.

It’s not that back-burning isn’t helpful, says Guadalu-
pita Volunteer Fire Department Chief Isaac Herrera, who
himself lost 130 acres to the fire. “It’s a great tool when
done responsibly,” he notes. But Herrera believes there
were times in recent weeks when it was “done irrespon-
sibly and recklessly” disregarding the deep knowledge of
the terrain that he and other locals possess.

In response, managers of the wildfire-fighting effort
say they had to make decisions amid the chaos. “We
don’t want to burn up anybody’s timber,” says Jason Coli,
who oversees the Southwest Area Incident Management
Team. “But there’s been a lot of choices that we’ve been
forced to make about what’s most important to save.”

Their first priority is to save homes, for example.

If the conditions had afforded firefighters more time
and resources, Coli says — and if they’d had several
choices at hand — “we would pick something different.”

THE EVER-PRESENT HISTORY

Recovering from the fire will depend to a certain extent
on extinguishing pain from the past. And the past can
seem omnipresent in Northern New Mexico.

Over the past 60 years, intense conflicts have erupt-
ed over how the USFS has managed the forests, limiting
people’s ability to graze livestock, hunt for food and re-
pair acequia headwaters. Some of the protests are still
talked about.

In 1966, land-grant activists occupied part of
the Carson National Forest, declaring that the land had been
appropriated; a year later, they carried out an infamous
armed raid on the Tierra Amarilla Courthouse, attempt-
ning to win the release of fellow activists.

Even a casual conversation in the fire zone can
suddenly pivot to the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo,
which promised — and failed — to protect the rights of
land-grantees and allow them to keep their commons.

Today, almost one-quarter of the Carson and Santa
Fe National Forests are made up of former land-grant
commons. In other parts of the state — in a district of the
Cibola National Forest, for example — a staggering 60
percent is made up of these commons, research shows.

The Forest Service has taken local needs into account,
spokesperson Overton wrote in an email. For example,
people with permits are allowed to cut firewood in des-
ignated areas. Many employees of the Santa Fe National
Forest are members of the community, she adds. “They
grew up here, they have the same ties to community and
cultural heritage as their neighbors.”

But today, this offers little comfort. Pola Lopez can still
remember how her father, the late state Sen. Junio Lopez,
made it his life’s mission to reunite the dispossessed with
their land. He was unable to produce wide-scale change,
however, and the purchase of the 157 acres now black-
ened by the fire was a kind of consolation prize. That land,
his daughter says, “became his sanctuary.”

In 2009, Pola had the property designated a conser-
vation easement, to protect the forest from develop-
ment for what she thought was perpetuity.

Now, the willows and scrubby oak are razed and the
stream that once flooded the banks of the canyon are
completely desecrated. But Lopez is most brokenheart-
ed by the loss of the old-growth forest, the “grandfather
trees,” as she calls them. Some were scorched so badly
that only holes full of ash remain.
IT’S QUIET OUTSIDE THE METROPOLITAN DETENTION Center, a hulking facility of brick, cinderblock and glass nearly 20 miles west of Albuquerque. On a recent day, cattle graze near the jail’s parking lot and though the Sandia Speedway is just up the road, the tracks are silent. Even the air is fresh — free of the stench of rotten eggs from the Cerro Colorado Landfill just two miles away.

Inside New Mexico’s largest jail, it’s a different story. The long hallways are lined with heaping piles of trash; there aren’t enough guards or custodial staff on hand to remove them. Many of the 1,400 inmates are confined to their cells for up to four days in a row, with no time allowed for a walk in the yard or an opportunity to make a phone call.

These are the conditions as described by a longtime guard. “Conditions have plummeted into an unimaginable state,” wrote Sgt. Robert Mason on May 24 in a letter to the Bernalillo County Commission, the county manager and the jail’s chief. “The smell of people not being able to bathe for days and trash piling up in cells can be horrific.”

Shortly before retiring in June, the jail’s chief, Greg Richardson, declared a state of emergency, overriding restrictions on overtime. Instead of easing the problem, it exacerbated the sense of futility expressed by some guards.

SAFETY HAS BECOME SUCH A CONCERN AT THE METROPOLITAN DETENTION CENTER THAT NEW MEXICO’S PUBLIC DEFENDER’S OFFICE NO LONGER ALLOWS ITS ATTORNEYS TO SET FOOT IN THE BUILDING TO CONFER WITH CLIENTS.

Safety has become such a concern that New Mexico’s Public Defender’s Office no longer allows its attorneys to set foot in the building to confer with clients. The lack of guards has created an unsafe environment, according to Bennett Baur, the state’s chief public defender. “They basically bring us into a pod with a bunch of people and say, ‘OK, go talk to your client in the corner,’” Baur said. “And there may or may not be a (correctional officer) in the pod, because they’re like, trying to watch multiple things, because they’re understaffed. Everything’s OK until it’s not. And you just can’t wait until somebody gets hurt.”

Baur is one of many interviewed for this story who evoked the 1980 New Mexico State Penitentiary riot, one of the most violent prison riots in American history, when describing the present-day conditions at MDC. Substandard, violent, understaffed: Those were the words most often used to describe the penitentiary back in the early hours of Feb. 2, 1980, when inmates overpowered guards and began a 36-hour rampage of brutality and murder that left 33 inmates dead and scores injured.

These are the same words now used to describe the MDC.

UNDERSTAFFING AT THE ROOT OF ALL PROBLEMS

Most everyone blames the current situation on understaffing, which is said to be at 50 percent of capacity. Like
“Everything’s OK until it’s not. And you just can’t wait until somebody gets hurt.”

– BENNETT BAUR
N.M. Chief Public Defender

many issues, it is part of a larger, long-festering problem that dates back almost 30 years, when a coalition of inmates joined a class-action lawsuit against the old jail, then located in downtown Albuquerque. That lawsuit, McClendon v. Albuquerque, laid out a litany of complaints: inmates sleeping on the floors, sexual assaults that were a daily occurrence, nonfunctioning toilets, infestations of “mice, roaches and other vermin.”

The 1995 lawsuit sparked a public outcry and led to the closing of the old jail and the opening of the Metropolitan Detention Center in 2003. The lawsuit itself dragged on for more than two decades before a settlement con-
tinued that 257 conditions, divided into eight “domains,”

under-staffing is so severe, inmates aren’t released in a timely manner. Mason recounted cases of inmates held long past their release dates, simply because there aren’t enough employees to process the fingerprinting and oth-
er services required to let them out.

“Some of these people have been waiting months to be released due to their sentencing conditions, others have won in the courtroom requiring their release, and others were booked in on charges that did not require them to remain in custody while they go through the judicial pro-
cess,” he wrote. “Nevertheless, people have spent more time in custody than is required of them.”

TOO LITTLE TOO LATE
Bernalillo County is working to boost retention and hire more guards. In July, it approved across-the-board raises for corrections officers, after a federal judge ordered the hiring of an additional 111 guards in the next two years.

Under the plan, new hires will receive a $5,000 sign-
ing bonus, while experienced officers — those transfer-
ing from other facilities — will get up to $10,000. Pay will increase, from $19.85 to $22.43 per hour for officers with four years or less experience, and from $21.83 to $24.67 per hour for those with five years or more.

But dozens of employees at MDC haven’t stuck around to get those raises. In a three-month period, between May and August of this year, MDC lost 58 employees and

medical and mental health care are not significantly better than 1995.”

In January, MDC nurse Taleigh Sanchez alleged, as part of the ongoing lawsuit, that the jail didn’t have a doctor on site. Sanchez said she had worked in the jail since 2011 and was worried for the safety of everyone inside.

MDC and county officials have denied her allegation, saying that there have consistently been nurse practi-
tioners on staff at the facility.

According to Mason, 16 people have died since the beginning of 2020 — several from complications of sub-
stance abuse or by suicide. A 2021 lawsuit alleged that eight of those people died over the span of five months. One inmate who hung himself in his cell in 2020 did so while the guard directly outside that cell slept through the night, according to a November 2021 lawsuit filed by his mother. The lawsuit further claims that, a few days earlier, a suicide risk assessment had identified the in-
mate as having a psychiatric disorder.

A 2016 report from the New Mexico Association of Counties found that 35 percent of jail inmates in the state are on prescribed psychotropic drugs. “Jails are de facto mental health hospitals,” it said. A 2017 U.S. Department of Justice report found that 44 percent of jail inmates nationally had been diagnosed with a mental disorder. That same year, another report found that 63 percent of sentenced jail inmates were addicted to drugs.

‘A GIANT STEP BACK’

Peter Cubra, one of several Albuquerque lawyers who represented inmates in the McClendon suit, claims that the jail has actually “taken a giant step back.”

In Cubra’s opinion, the only thing that’s changed inside MDC is that it’s no longer “hellishly overcrowded.

“Many of the things that were wrong in 1995 are happen-

ing now,” he said. “We’ve got more beds, more foot-
age and roughly the same number of people that we had before. But the staffing is grossly inadequate. The safe-

UPDATE 08/16/2022:
Sgt. Robert Mason, a longtime corrections officer in New Mexico’s largest jail, was placed on paid administrative leave after Searchlight’s article de-
tailing the jail’s conditions.

“I’ve written many letters and public comment have gained lots of praise from my staff, support staff, and even some top administration officials, this action is what many worry about and why people are afraid to speak up to any degree,” said Mason, following the announcement of his departure.
Along with the rest of the country, homelessness has swelled to crisis levels in New Mexico, with a particularly stark increase in the number of people living on the streets, in cars and elsewhere outdoors.

STORY & PHOTOS BY MICHAEL BENANAV  |  SEPTEMBER 19, 2022

ON A SWELTERING DAY AT THE END OF JULY, Mike Amos crouched by his tent, fiddling with a few car batteries powered by solar panels that sat on the bottom rack of a shopping cart. Amos used them to charge his phone, e-cigarettes and an electric skillet while living at Albuquerque’s Coronado Park, where he has stayed for much of the last six years. He had a couple of other carts filled with his belongings, along with a bicycle and a brindle Tennessee hound named Skittles. “Compared to the rest of society, I’m a dirtbag,” he said. “But for here, I live pretty good.”

On any given night, some 70 to 120 people stayed in the park that had become the face of Albuquerque’s homeless crisis, with a reputation as a haven for drug use, violence and poor sanitation. When Mayor Tim Keller announced his intentions to dismantle the encampment before the end of August, Amos knew his life was about to change. “The city is stuck, there’s nothing they can do. I get why they want to close this place,” he said. “But if they just kick us out, people will freak out when we go to their neighborhoods.”

Amos, who graduated from Albuquerque’s Sandia High School in 1979, didn’t know what he was going to do. “I fly by the seat of my pants;” he said. “I don’t have a Plan B.”

Neither, it seemed, did the city.

“We do not have the luxury of a perfect plan,” Mayor Keller acknowledged at a July 26 press conference to discuss Coronado’s imminent closure. Flanking him was Albuquerque Police acting commander Nick Wheeler, who reeled off statistics: five homicides and 16 stabbings had occurred at or near the park over the past two years; police were called there 651 times last year and 312 times in 2022, to date. Closing the park was imperative for public safety, Keller said. “So the first step is to figure out what we’re going to do in August. Then once we actually close the park, we’ll have the time to think through longer-term options.”

THE SLOW PACE OF PROGRESS
Along with the rest of the country, homelessness has swelled to crisis levels in New Mexico, with a particularly stark increase in the number of people living on the streets, in cars and elsewhere outdoors.

Today, Albuquerque’s unhoused population might be as high as 5,000, estimates Tony Watkins of the New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness (NMCEH). While data about the problem is notoriously inexact, “it’s self-evident that there are a lot more people on the streets” than there were five years ago, Watkins said.

But solutions are exquisitely hard to find. For one, people camping on the streets and in parks and arroyos have a variety of different needs. Some are mired in addictions or have mental or physical health issues. Others have simply fallen on hard times and have been priced out of an increasingly exorbitant rental market. While many would, ideally, like to be able to move into a house or an apartment, others feel more suited to tent life.

In Santa Fe, efforts to address the problem have led to only incremental progress, failing for short of meeting the city’s needs.
alcohol are barred from the premises and residents aren’t allowed to cause a disturbance, but sobriety is not required. Residents are expected to pitch in to keep the place clean and safe.

Part of its success is that it sits next door to a soup kitchen, a food bank, a health clinic and a day care center. The main office is bustling with people, including some who don’t live at the camp. They come in to do laundry, pick up mail, get help with filling out paperwork or browse through donated clothing. Walls are covered with bulletin boards papered with information about health and housing resources. The weather forecast for the week is written in blue ink on a whiteboard.

Though the goal of Camp Hope is, ultimately, to move people into housing units, MVCH Executive Director Nicole Martinez recognizes that, for some, camp life is the best option. “We see this as a waiting room for housing,” she said. “But some people don’t want to go indoors. Or they may not want to go indoors today. One resident stayed at the camp for seven years — she’s now been housed for three.”

Residents elect camp managers from their own ranks; others who show leadership qualities can be trained to work on a safety team. One of the current managers, J.J. Dalcour, thinks he was elected because “I don’t raise my voice or get mad easily and I listen to both sides if there’s an issue that has to get worked out.”

Once a long-haul truck driver, Dalcour quit after he was sideswiped by a car while riding his bicycle. “I think I have a traumatic brain injury, so I stopped driving because I didn’t want to kill or hurt anyone,” he said. “You’re carrying 80,000 pounds going more than 70 miles an hour — I didn’t want to risk it. It was the hardest decision I ever made.”

“We are working on a by-name list that tells you how many people need housing and who they are,” Santa Fe Mayor Alan Webber said in an interview at his city hall office. “It’s about figuring out a methodology that gets each person in the queue the kind of housing that works for them.”

The city entered a partnership with the nonprofit Community Solutions to purchase Santa Fe Suites and transform the hotel into housing for 120 people, a project completed in 2021. It’s doing the same with the Lighthouse, which has about half the capacity and could open in 2023.

But housing for hundreds of other people has yet to be found.

“Santa Fe is struggling to find an answer that works for the community,” said Mark Oldknow, associate director of NMCEH. “It’s hard to get around NIMBYism — people don’t want a new facility in their backyard, whatever it is. I appreciate that reaction, and I understand it, but it has to be in someone’s backyard.”

HOPE IN LAS CRUCES

Some cities believe the answers lie in “sanctioned encampments” — managed sites in safe places where people live in individual tents. Denver, Austin, San Francisco and Portland are among the cities that have experimented with this model. But to find an example that’s been hailed as a success, there’s no need to look outside of New Mexico.

Camp Hope in Las Cruces, run by the nonprofit Mesilla Valley Community of Hope (MVCH) and established on city-owned land, has been lauded nationwide. Founded in 2011, it has played an important role in bringing the Las Cruces homeless veteran population to “functional zero,” advocates say.

It can serve up to 45 people, who live in orderly rows of tents, most of them protected from the elements by three-sided lean-tos. Shaded structures provide residents with places to gather, including one with a television. There are bathrooms, showers and lockers, and though the facilities are basic, they are well organized. Drugs and

“The city is stuck, there’s nothing they can do. But if they just kick us out, people will freak out when we go to their neighborhoods.” — MIKE AMOS

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Some advocates for the homeless, however, warn that city-sanctioned encampments can lead to the criminalization — and arrest — of people bivouacked elsewhere. The camps can become a cut-rate “good enough” alternative to actual housing, they say.

Dalcour had trouble finding another job. He tried living with his mother, but “that didn’t work out. If Camp Hope wasn’t here, I’d probably be on the streets somewhere. And it’s not pleasant out there. Here, it’s much safer. It feels like a big family.”

When done right, encampments offer a sense of dignity and “a greater sense of autonomy and security from targeted aggression, assault, theft or police harassment,” as the National League of Cities puts it.

Some advocates for the homeless, however, warn that city-sanctioned encampments can lead to the criminalization — and arrest — of people bivouacked elsewhere. The camps can become a cut-rate “good enough” alternative to actual housing, critics say.

The other sticking point: Not all cities have found a way to accept them. Residents of Santa Fe and Albuquerque, for example, have thus far pushed back against this model.

Santa Fe had begun to explore the possibility of establishing a so-called Safe Sleeping Village at a former college campus off busy St. Michael’s Drive, surrounded by a shopping plaza, restaurants and other businesses. At the start of the pandemic, a dormitory there was converted into an emergency shelter for people experiencing homelessness, but that only put a dent in the city’s needs.

Scores of makeshift encampments appeared across Santa Fe over the next two years. The Safe Sleeping Village proposal was nevertheless nixed in August 2022, following protests from nearby businesses.

Albuquerque faced similar challenges after city council members passed legislation in June to create Safe

“THE MIDDLE OF THE WAR ZONE”
For now, Santa Fe and Albuquerque residents are left to wonder when the flurry of government plans will result in real change — and people experiencing homelessness don’t know what their options will be.

Just before being evicted from Coronado Park, Mike Amos was given a motel voucher. It made him uneasy. “The voucher is only good for one week, and I don’t know if I’ll get extended for another week, so it’s kind of unsettling,” he said.

“And the place I’m in is a wreck. It’s right in the middle of the War Zone, with pillheads, hookers and gangs. I felt much safer at the park. I knew my neighbors, I knew where to have breakfast, I knew everything that was going on in our little microcosm. Here, I don’t know what I need to survive, or what’s going to happen next.”

We’re still human beings. We just don’t live like everyone else does.”
— MIKE AMOS
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Tom Johnson
Yale Jones
Robby Jones
Janice Jones
Harvey Juris

William M Kaisar
Diane Karp
Carolyn Kastner
Claire Katz
John Kelly
Wendi Killean
Virginia King
Steve Kopelman
George Kopp
Bonna Korman
Som Kulessa
Carolina Lajoie
Carolyn Lake
Leslie Lakind
Jai Laishram
Mary Lance
Barbara Larson
Joan Lasker Sabel
Robert Lavalle
Patrick Lee
Gloria Lehmer
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Charles Lewis
Lucy Lipford
Linda Lockett
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Paula Panich
Paul Parmenter
Dan Pennington
Angela Pennington
Michelle Perea
William Patrick
Pierre Pfeffer
David Phillips
Jean Phillips
James Phillips
Paul Pino
Erika Pratts
Jeffrey Pitman
David Poloschek
Elizabeth Pope
Alyson Porter
Suzanne Priscott
Ann Roden-Tota
Sylvia Ramos Cruz
Santiago Ramos Jr.
Bishnu Routh
S Reed
Mary Rausch
William Riker
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John Robertson
Alice Rodgers
Sally Rodgers
Rick Rodriguez
Michael Rodriguez
Ana Rodriguez
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Marylin Winter-Tamkin
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Kathy Wootton
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Judith Yarbrough
Daniel Yohalem
Dean Zanton
Dinav Zatorski

These represent donations from January 1, 2022 - December 12, 2022. We apologize in advance for any errors or omissions.
WHEN THE WELL RUNS DRY

MAGDALENA, N.M. — Mayor Richard Rumpf drives slowly through town — population 870 — and gestures toward the new ambulance, the volunteer fire department that he captains, the library housed in a converted train station. His role in the community spans everything from substitute teaching at the local school — “State champs again,” he says proudly of the boys’ basketball team — to playing Santa Claus in the Christmas parade. “This is my community,” Rumpf says. “I put a lot of effort into it.”

A large part of that effort goes into one of Magdalena’s primary concerns: water management. As climate change makes the state ever hotter and drier — threatening small towns, rivers and cherished landscapes — few places are taking this problem as seriously as Magdalena.

Rumpf says he now thinks about Magdalena’s water system “every single day.” He’s fortifying the village against future scarcity — monitoring wells, building new water tanks and conserving water. He has secured grant money to help with infrastructure, and is committed to protecting the village’s water future.

Magdalena’s innovative approach to water conservation is an anomaly in New Mexico. The state’s rural areas often lack the resources for robust water data systems. Instead of advanced well-monitoring systems, steel tape-measure soundings track water levels. Some small towns keep records of water levels by handwriting them on the walls of well houses, which are periodically painted over — obliterating important data and making them more vulnerable to well failure.

Often, it takes a crisis like Magdalena’s for a small-town government to recognize the problem and act on it. And even as news of the drying Southwest has become common knowledge, the New Mexico state government has done almost nothing to prepare for this future, failing to collect enough basic data to determine how much water there exists in the system. By the time New Mexicans realize the stakes, it may be too late.

“It could be 100 years, or 80 years, or 60 years — we’ve got a limited amount of water,” says Dave DuBois, New Mexico’s state climatologist. “We’ve got these long horizons, but that doesn’t mean we need to blow through that and then figure out what to do.”

BY ANNABELLA FARMER AND LINDSAY FENDT | PHOTOS BY DON J. USNER | JANUARY 13, 2022

MAGDALENA’S PRIMARY CONCERNS: WATER MANAGEMENT. AS CLIMATE CHANGE MAKES THE STATE HOTTER AND DRIER — THREATENING SMALL TOWNS, RIVERS AND CHERISHED LANDSCAPES — FEW PLACES ARE TAKING THIS PROBLEM AS SERIOUSLY AS MAGDALENA.

WATER DATA’S BIG BLACK HOLE
Magdalena’s well crisis was a wake-up call for Stacy Timmons, associate director of hydrogeology programs at the New Mexico Bureau of Geology. Timmons is based at New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology in Socorro, the “big city” closest to Magdalena, and when the town started having water trouble it called her in to help.

With her small team, Timmons started trying to put together information about the history of the well and the aquifer it draws from. The reports they needed weren’t available anywhere and they spent months piecing together the data required to solve the town’s problems.

“It was a bit eye-opening as to how much time it took, and in a moment of crisis like that when they were out of water, time wasn’t something that we had a whole lot of,” says Timmons.

She soon realized that the problem wasn’t isolated to Magdalena. All over the state there were huge gaps in water data. There was no centralized database with records or measurements — everything had to be pieced together document by document.

The problems extend beyond small-town water governance. The state as a whole does little to track how much water flows in and out of its rivers and aquifers. There’s no one agency that tracks how many wells go dry each year, or a single office that can provide a firm answer on how much water is used throughout the state.

It all adds up to a big black hole in water information, which means that no one in all of New Mexico knows how much water the state has or how much time remains before it disappears.

Many water experts say that assembling this information is the critical first step in planning for a future with even less water.

“We could go one way, which is just to throw up our hands and say we’ll just deal with it as it comes,” Timmons says. “The other way would be to really try to nail down exactly how much [water] we have and make sure we can be fair and equitable about everybody getting some.”

But closing these data gaps won’t be easy. Many water measurements require manual labor that can only be done onsite with rudimentary tools. More advanced types of data collection are often prohibitively expensive and require specialized staff. Since her epiphany in Magdalena, Timmons has been busy finding ways to embark on this long arduous process.

She’s already helped launch several groundwater mapping and monitoring projects. She is also in charge of implementing the Water Data Act, a law passed in 2019 that requires state water agencies to standardize information and make it accessible to the public.

But New Mexico has been hesitant to fund these projects. The Water Data Act appropriated only $110,000 in funds from state coffers — hardly enough to organize the state’s water resources.

And while it may be bad now, it’s about to get much worse.

THIS IS NOT A DROUGHT
Across the Southwest, the effects of climate change are already apparent in rising temperatures, thinning snow packs, and sparse and variable precipitation patterns. These symptoms might be mistaken for the periods of historic drought familiar to longtimers, but unlike past drought cycles, today’s water scarcity will not be alleviated by periods of relative moisture.

All water that ends up in New Mexico’s water budget begins as rain or snow, which either runs off into rivers and streams (i.e., surface water) or seeps into the earth as groundwater, replenishing aquifers.

As rain and snow dwindle, water supplies are acutely affected. Thin snowpacks mean less runoff into rivers and streams, which means less aquifer recharge, which means less groundwater. When surface water is scarce, people start pumping more groundwater. This, in turn, means even less surface water, as rains on aquifers can sap water from rivers and streams.

Andrew Erdmann, the state’s newly appointed water planning program manager, likens the projected reduction in groundwater recharge to “having the interest rates go down on your savings account.” And, experts say, these conditions will only get worse. The only uncertainty is how much worse and how fast it will happen.

DuBois, the state climatologist, recently collaborated on a draft analysis of climate change impacts on water resources as part of the state’s working 50 Year Water Plan. The forecast, he says, is not encouraging.

TOUGH CHOICES
For much of New Mexico, the worst-case water scenario is already here.

“Last year, the state paid farmers along the Rio Grande to follow more than 1,200 acres of fields to save water. In the Clovis-Portales area, near the Texas border, aquifer levels have dropped more than 150 feet in some places, threatening drinking water supplies. In Las Vegas, locals can no longer swim and play in the natural pools that their parents and grandparents once enjoyed along the Rio Gallinas.

It’s inevitable that other communities across the state will face similar water challenges in the coming years or decades. Once-thriving rural communities could become ghost towns, and cities could struggle to expand unless they have the information needed to plan ahead.

“Data is what fundamentally underlies and supports that type of decision making,” says Timmons. “In times when a community runs out of water we can’t spend a month and a half trying to find data about it.”

Even with this data, climate change means that over the next few decades New Mexican society will need to make tough choices about who gets water and who goes without. By ignoring our knowledge gaps now, we may get no future choices. Instead, climate and geology will decide who wins and who loses the water lottery.

Magdalena Mayor Richard Rumpf

“Our current drought is more like what we’re going to see in the future, meaning low reservoir levels, little to no irrigation, high temperatures. That’s our trajectory.”

He says the severity of these outcomes depends on different pollution levels, and there’s no way to know exactly what the future will hold. But the worst case would be no water in some areas of the state.

For many New Mexicans, the idea of a home without water seems like a dystopian future that will never become reality. Water use continues much as it has since the state’s water use laws were codified more than 100 years ago — allowing practices like flood irrigation for crops like alfalfa and pecans — in addition to more recent water-sucking industries like fracking and newly legalized recreational cannabis. For DuBois, these attitudes are of great concern.

“We have to be able to convince people that this is real, it’s coming and we need to plan and adapt for the future,” he says.

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NEW MEXICO HAS YET TO BUILD THE SYSTEM IT PROMISED: “A STATEWIDE, COMMUNITY-BASED BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SYSTEM THAT ALL CHILDREN AND FAMILIES WILL BE ABLE TO ACCESS.”

BY ED WILLIAMS, SEARCHLIGHT NEW MEXICO, WITH DATA ANALYSIS BY JOEL JACOBS, PROPUBLICA, AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY KITRA CAHANA. SPECIAL TO PROPUBLICA

OCTOBER 7, 2022

HOURS AFTER JAIDRYON PLATERO ATTEMPTED SUICIDE, an employee of New Mexico’s child welfare agency visited the 16-year-old in the hospital to investigate whether he was a victim of child neglect.

Platero winced whenever he turned his head, a sharp jolt of pain emanating from the stab wounds left in his neck during a mental breakdown.

The teen needed mental health care and was unsafe living on the streets, the child welfare investigator concluded in a report. Platero’s mother, whom he had been living with, couldn’t be located. He was taken into foster care and transferred to a psychiatric hospital.

About a week later, doctors deemed him stable enough to be discharged. Platero gathered his belongings — a bag holding a change of clothes, a pamphlet from the American Association of Suicidology and a prescription for an antipsychotic drug — and climbed into a silver van emblazoned with the New Mexico state seal.

He hoped that the worker with the Children, Youth and Families Department would take him to his grandmother’s home near Farmington. Instead, they pulled up to a youth homeless shelter.

Platero would spend six months at the San Juan County Emergency Crisis Shelter, sleeping on a metal-framed bed with a thin foam mattress.

Facilities like this, known as children’s crisis shelters, are licensed to temporarily house kids with nowhere to go. They don’t provide psychiatric care. But they are home to some of the foster system’s highest-needs teens, an investigation by Searchlight New Mexico and ProPublica found.

It wasn’t supposed to be this way. Two and a half years ago, the state of New Mexico settled a landmark civil rights lawsuit, agreeing to place teens in foster homes or with relatives instead of emergency facilities such as youth shelters. The agreement also called for the state to reduce its reliance on residential treatment centers — troubled facilities that had become hotbeds of abuse and assault.

The state fulfilled part of its agreement, largely by shutting down several residential treatment centers. Due to those closures, the number of children in group facilities, which includes shelters and residential treatment centers, has dropped by about 60% over the four years ending in August, according to the state.

But New Mexico has yet to build the system it promised: “a statewide, community-based behavioral health system that all children and families will be able to access.”

With few other options, child welfare workers place youth in crisis shelters hundreds of times every year. Some of these teenagers are suicidal, police records show. Others have such diagnoses as PTSD, depression or developmental disabilities.

These teens spend days, weeks or months in dorm-like facilities that don’t offer intensive mental health treatment, according to state records and interviews with shelter employees. Often, youth are abruptly moved to another shelter. And then another. Sometimes those moves are precipitated by a fight or a breakdown. Sometimes the kids run away.

Youth advocates and attorneys call them the “shelter shuffle.”

The state acknowledges this is a problem. Most of the 1,800 or so youth in foster care — which encompasses all children in custody of CYFD’s protective services office — live with foster families in their own communities, said Rob Johnson, public information officer for CYFD. “However, a small number require a higher level of care that, in some circumstances, is currently not available in New Mexico.”

To understand how this plays out, Searchlight and ProPublica interviewed staff at the nine facilities in New Mexico that house the vast majority of foster teenagers in the state. Other states have turned to offices, hotels and sometimes shelters when no foster home is available. But the situation in New Mexico is particularly acute because the state ranks last in child welfare, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The state’s reliance on youth homeless shelters is not new. Though the state could not provide precise annual figures on shelter placements, shelter managers say they have seen more referrals for youth with severe behavioral problems since CYFD began closing residential treatment centers.

“We now have the kids most in need of help in the facilities least equipped to help them,” said Dr. George Davis, the former director of psychiatry for CYFD and a plaintiff in the Kevin S. lawsuit, as the civil rights suit became known.

THESE FOSTER KIDS NEED MENTAL HEALTH CARE. NEW MEXICO IS PUTTING THEM IN HOMELESS SHELTERS.
The state said it has created new services like coordinated, family-driven care plans and has funded additional community health workers in an attempt to fill the gap in mental health services, which it attributes to the closure of more than a dozen behavioral health care providers after the state froze their funding in 2013.

"Building out a full array of children’s behavioral health services in communities across the state from an essentially non-existent system takes time — but we are building it," Johnson said in a written statement.

Children’s attorneys said the new initiatives reach few kids, and not the ones who need the most help.

"We’re still at square one," said Sara Crecca, an Albuquerque-based children’s attorney who was co-counsel for the plaintiffs in the Kevin S. suit. "It's really, really, really frustrating because these young people deserve so much better."

Between 2019 and 2021, three New Mexico residential treatment centers closed under pressure from the state. Several others shut down on their own during the pandemic. Now, aside from tribal facilities, three residential treatment centers with just 74 beds are left to house teens without histories of violence or sexual offenses.

"All we have left is shelters," said Brooke Tafoya, chief executive officer of New Day Youth and Family Services. "There are few residential treatment centers left, and we barely have any foster placements."

When Platero arrived at the San Juan County shelter, he was placed on suicide watch. Instead of sleeping in the dorms, he'd be on a mattress on the floor of the common room, where an employee could keep an eye on him through a window.

"I'm sitting in there like, 'When am I going to get out?'" Platero said. "How long do I have to be here?"

"WE HAVE NOWHERE FOR THEM TO GO"

Across the U.S., there’s a shortage of foster homes, and even fewer for teens. In New Mexico, the number of non-relative foster homes willing to take teenagers has decreased 44% since 2018, according to CYFD.

Homeless shelters are one of the few options left for CYFD case workers, who contact one after another looking for a bed, according to children’s attorneys and CYFD employees. If they can’t find one, the kids in their care typically sleep at CYFD’s main Albuquerque office, a nondescript building in an office park — sometimes for a night, sometimes longer.

"It breaks my heart when I have to take a teenager into custody," said a CYFD employee who, like the others, spoke on the condition of anonymity because they fear retaliation by the agency. "Because I know we have nowhere for them to go. I know they’ll end up in a homeless shelter, and we’ll be trying in vain to find them a placement until they turn 18."

CYFD initially provided figures showing shelter placements have dropped, but it later acknowledged problems in the data. The department did not provide comparable data by Searchlight and ProPublica’s deadline.

But the agency acknowledges that it is placing too many kids in shelters. An appropriate stay in a shelter is "zero" days, said Emily Martin, head of CYFD’s protective services division: "Because it’s just another level of congregate care. It’s not family-based. It doesn’t always include the services that are needed."

However, Johnson wrote, "CYFD does not impose placements on any shelter."

Shelter managers said they sometimes refuse to accept placements, often because the teens were previously involved in some sort of altercation there or because the shelter is housing other high-needs youth who require a lot of staff resources.

Managers say they try to help kids placed at their shelters as much as they can, even though they’re not set up to deal with youth in need of psychiatric services. They accept many of those placements "because there is a need, and our job is to provide support to young people who are in need," said Tafoya, of the New Day shelter.

CYFD Secretary Barbara Vigil acknowledged the difficulties workers face when trying to find beds for youth who otherwise may end up on the street.

“Our front-line workers are faced with very hard choices, and the first and foremost is to keep that child safe... Since 2019, there have been at least 465 calls to 911 regarding physical violence, disorderly conduct and mental health crises at the nine facilities that house most foster teens in shelters."
“I got something a lot of people don’t get, which is a second chance.”

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“JAIDRYON, STAY WITH ME, OK? YOU’RE OK. WE’RE HERE TO HELP YOU.”

“In the weeks before his breakdown, Platero and his mom were staying at a Motel 6 in Farmington. The two of them had run into trouble for drinking at a local park, police records show, and Platero had been caught smoking marijuana in a high school bathroom.

He had begun smoking a synthetic cannabis compound called Spice, which he suspects was laced with methamphetamine. He was becoming paranoid, shivering through freakish hallucinations and convinced that others at the motel would hurt him and his mother.

His grip on reality slipping, one afternoon he grabbed a large knife from his motel room and darted through traffic. Sheriff’s deputies and police chased him, firing their tasers and knocking him onto the ground.

When a sheriff’s deputy fired a series of beanbag rounds at Platero, he stabbed himself over and over. Officers rushed him, firing their tasers and knocking him onto his back.

Farmington Police Officer Cierra Manus, a crisis negotiator, cradled his head as he lay in the grass. “Jaidryon, stay with me, OK?” she said. “You’re OK. We’re here to help you.”

He was loaded into an ambulance and taken to a local hospital. Miraculously, he required only minor treatment for his wounds. In the span of nine days, Platero went from there to a psychiatric hospital, and then to the San Juan County Emergency Crisis Shelter.

Two psychological evaluations, including one four days after he arrived at the shelter, concluded that Platero needed intensive care and recommended he enter a residential treatment program. Though he was a “likeable young man” and a “resilient adolescent,” a psychologist noted, he had a history of making suicidal statements. He was diagnosed with substance abuse disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder and oppositional defiant disorder.

About a month after Platero entered foster care, his caseworker began looking for a bed in a residential treatment center. Platero, however, didn’t want to enroll in such a program; he wanted to go to his grandmother’s nearby on the Navajo Nation or, failing that, a foster home.

Platero’s grandmother couldn’t physically care for him, a CYFD worker wrote in his case plan. No foster homes were available, according to his attorney.

CALLING 911 AS A LAST RESORT

Without the staff or expertise to deal with youth in the midst of mental health crises, shelters often turn to the police. Since 2019, there have been at least 465 calls to 911 regarding physical violence, disorderly conduct and mental health crises at the nine facilities that house most foster teens in shelters, according to a review of emergency dispatch records. At least 650 calls have been made to report runaways.

The records often don’t note whether a child is in CYFD custody, but shelter managers said most of their residents are in foster care.

At least 35 children have been the subject of 911 calls at three or more shelters, including reports that they had run away in the same time period. At least 22 of them were wards of the state, according to dispatch records.

Last spring, staff at one shelter called police when a 13-year-old foster kid with a history of attempting suicide said he wanted to kill himself. The boy, who said he had been jumping around, was placed in handcuffs and taken to a hospital emergency room, according to police records.

The next month, at a different shelter, the boy locked himself in a bathroom and attempted suicide, according to a sheriff’s department incident report.

In some 911 recordings, employees describe fearing for their lives in the midst of a youth’s violent outburst.

In one case, a staff member climbed out a window to flag down officers as a 12-year-old girl tried to break down a door with a fire extinguisher, according to a dispatch call log and an audio recording.

“Does anybody else there need an ambulance?” the dispatcher asked.

“Not at this point, although we’re gonna need one pretty soon,” the caller said.

“For her?” the dispatcher asked.

“No, for us, if she gets in here.”

Often, kids’ mental health problems worsen in the shelter, according to employees.

Davis, the former CYFD psychiatrist, said the problem isn’t just that these teens don’t have access to adequate mental and behavioral health care. It’s that living weeks or months in an emergency placement is itself destabilizing and traumatizing.

“What kids in this situation need is a caretaker, someone who gives them a safe home to live in and who thinks they are the most important person in the world,” Davis said. When those kids are placed in shelters, “trying to give them mental health care in that situation is useless.”

“I NEEDED HELP”

One day after school, about two weeks into his stay at the shelter, Platero decided he wasn’t going back. He walked past the school bus and headed toward town. He didn’t know where he was going, he said he hoped he could find his mom at one of their old hangouts.

Platero’s caseworker and another CYFD employee found him 11 days later at his grandmother’s house. “They’re like, we’re gonna call the cops if you don’t fricken’ go with us,” he said.

He hugged his grandmother and got in the car. He ran away again six months later, and again several days after that, building up a record in juvenile court along the way. All the while, he said, his drug problem deepened.

“I needed help,” Platero said. “My mentality was fucked up. I thought I was a last angel. I looked at this place as hell and I thought I had to come up with my own gangster way of expressing myself to survive in this world.”

In October 2019, Platero agreed to enter a residential program. A bed had opened up at the Navajo Regional Behavioral Health Center, a facility run by the Navajo Nation in Shiprock that employs traditional healing methods to treat drug and mental health problems. He made it most of the way through the program before being kicked out for smoking marijuana.

Finally, after nearly two years of petitioning by his attorney, just shy of his 18th birthday, CYFD agreed to let Platero live with his grandmother.

Now living in a subsidized apartment in Albuquerque, he’s gotten used to the scars on his neck. They’re reminders of how far he’s come. “I got something a lot of people don’t get,” he said. “which is a second chance.”

This article was produced for ProPublica’s Local Reporting Network in partnership with Searchlight New Mexico.
BACK TO SCHOOL

IN THE FIRE ZONE

BY ÁLICIA INEZ GUZMÁN | AUGUST 18, 2022
Ever since the start of the monsoon season, a torrent of boulders and debris has tumbled down the mountainside toward the Encinias family home, only months after the land was laid bare by fire. On April 22, the Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon blaze consumed almost everything around them, including their five-bedroom house, private well and most all worldly possessions. Since then, the family of five, their four dogs and eight cats have lived in a 38-foot RV.

The summer has been unspeakable for Daniel and Lori Ann Encinias’ three youngest daughters, who, in the coming days, are slated to return to school: Amanda, 18, at Luna Community College, and Justina, 16, and Jaylene, 15, at Robertson High School. For them and countless others, catastrophe overshadows their return to learning.

“The only thing we want is to be able to get a house,” says Justina, known to her sisters as Jayjay. Classes, school supplies, band — the sisters’ favorite — all seem insignificant now, as they gather on the front steps of the RV. The rubble around them is a constant reminder of their loss.

Their new reality is defined by cramped bunks and hauling water from a relative’s house to replenish the RV’s single shower. Getting ready for school every morning on the limited tank will be “the hardest thing,” Justina predicted, looking to Amanda and Jaylene for confirmation.

Besides the clothes she wore, Justina saved Ruby, her childhood stuffed rabbit, and a camera her parents bought her for Christmas. Beyond that, the Enciniases walked away with a handful of framed family photos, their pets and each other.
Monica Martinez said the evacuation was traumatic for her youngest daughter, 10-year-old Kateri, as well as for other children. When Martinez, who lives in Las Distens, arrived to pick up Kateri on evacuation day, police had commandeered the building, shuffling children out of classrooms. The blaze was still miles away, but smoke billowed from behind the hills.

“Kids were wondering why cops were in the hallways,” Martinez recalled. “They didn’t know what was going on.” The blaring police lights, the sense of disarray — all of it brought to mind school shootings, she said.

WE’RE NOT CANCELING

After the blaze took everything, the Encinias family faced additional chaos: Their RV wasn’t big enough to hold the three younger children plus their oldest daughter, her boyfriend and their three children, who had previously lived in the Encinias’ large home. They had little choice but to move out. The rest of the family spent the last month of school living in the RV at the campground at Storrie Lake State Park.

Some days, Lori Ann took the girls to school, other days, Robertson High School’s bus picked them up and dropped them off at the campground. When Amanda graduated, Daniel and Lori Ann still managed to host a graduation party — not at their home, as planned, but at the Elks Lodge in Las Vegas, some 20 miles south.

“We may have lost everything,” Danail told his wife, determined to keep some semblance of normalcy, “but we’re not canceling nothing.”

As evacuation zones reopened, he and other locals returned to the desolation of their property, where acres and acres of land had been devastated, cattle lacked feed and the little timber left wouldn’t be enough to sell or use for warmth in winter.

Power lines that were cut off or burned in the fire wreaked another kind of havoc: Without electricity, freezers and refrigerators full of food spoiled, costing residents hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars to replace. With power lines down for most of the summer, Daniel, a retired electrician, relied on two generators for the family hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars to replace. With power lines down for most of the summer, Daniel, a retired electrician, relied on two generators for the family. The family received $500 from FEMA for evacuation costs, Monica said, but the money hardly compares to all the dishes she cannot wash. For drinking water, she and her husband used to haul 5-gallon tanks from the local fire station and campground for free, but with Las Vegas’s emergency water shortage, they have recently begun buying it at a store. Water to flush their toilets and wash their hands comes from a nearby windmill that managed to escape damage.

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FOOD, HAY AND SUPPLIES NEEDED

The challenges are profound. Food insecurity, a long-running problem for low-income families in rural New Mexico, peaked during and after the fires, said Jill Dixon, deputy director of the Food Depot in Santa Fe. In May, the nonprofit’s distributions at the Mora Head Start building — a centerpiece of relief efforts — totaled 119,000 pounds of food. In the months since, approximately 920 people have consistently received food in the Mora area, a number that has not dropped, Dixon said.

The Mora Head Start building, a clearinghouse for fire updates and community forums, also became a distribution spot for donated firewood and five semi-loads of hay.

Most farmers and ranchers aren’t running booming businesses. They depend on small herds for their livelihoods, Griego said. The largest, he noted, is 17 head, the smallest two. Almost all were able to get feed from those semi-loads, thanks to a collaborative effort by multiple entities.

“Kids were wondering why cops were in the hallways,” Martinez recalled. “They didn’t know what was going on.” The blaring police lights, the sense of disarray — all of it brought to mind school shootings, she said.

SMALL MERCIES, LARGE LOSSES

The number of children affected will likely grow so long as the waves of complications continue. To meet the needs, Mora Independent Schools hired a social worker, available for a new hands-on curriculum called “expeditionary learning”. The goal, said Tracy Alco, principal of Holman Elementary school, is to get kids outside and thinking: “How does the world heal from something like this?” When they do, she went on, “they might walk away with a bigger view than oneself.”

Daniel Encinias, for his part, is preoccupied with clear- ing away debris from the family property, creating diversi- tion channels and moving the giant boulders that spilled off the mountaintop into the gaping potholes the floods cut in his driveway. He plans to put down a doublewide on the original house foundation by winter. It’s not the same as the home he spent years building, but it’ll do for now.

“Home is where we are,” he reminds his family, daily. He has little faith that the forest will recover in his life- time. “They’ll see it come back,” he says hopefully, gestur- ing toward Justina and Jaylene.

Jaylene, who once had a view of the vast expanse of Peñasco Blanco from her bedroom window, worries it won’t be “the same way we saw it.”

Justina is more optimistic. “It will be better. Stronger,” she says.
BY JOSHUA BOWLING | OCTOBER 13, 2022

ANGEL ACOSTA LEFT LAS CRUCES for California in the early morning of April 15. He was traveling alone on I-10 with $40,000 in cash — enough money to buy a van to haul products and equipment for his family’s business in Silver City.

It was hours before sunrise, hours before his girlfriend and 6-year-old daughter, Athena, would climb out of bed, hours before his mother would open the doors to La Bonita Bakery. Acosta knew this road. For the past 10 years, he’d driven the 113 miles from Las Cruces to Silver City nearly every day to work with his mother, Sandra Calderon, helping to expand her business, adding a convenience store stocked with cold drinks, packaged snacks and fresh tacos.

A few minutes after 4 a.m., he neared the U.S. Border Patrol checkpoint just west of Las Cruces. And from that point on, everything that’s known about the final moments of Angel Acosta — 27-year-old father, son, brother, U.S. citizen and New Mexico businessman — has to be attributed to New Mexico State Police, the Doña Ana County Fire and Emergency Services Department and a terse statement from U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

The collision happened so fast, according to CBP’s statement, that Acosta may never have seen the 2010 Honda Pilot hurtling toward him. Neither driver appeared to hit the brakes.

Border Patrol agents were chasing Victor Mendoza, a 28-year-old Las Cruces resident, who a few minutes earlier had pulled off the road near the agency’s checkpoint. Mendoza was a product of Las Cruces and since graduating high school had traveled the Southwest, playing the trumpet with mariachi bands.

State Police records show that Mendoza, who may have been intoxicated at the time, sat in his car a few minutes before turning around and driving the wrong way into oncoming traffic on I-10. Two Border Patrol agents gave chase. As they crossed the median to catch up with him, their vehicle got stuck in the desert scrub, police records say. Mendoza continued to barrel east, slamming into Acosta’s vehicle head on and sending it careening onto the shoulder. He died instantly.

Acosta’s 2021 Chevy pickup burst into flames; his body incinerated. The $40,000 in cash burned with him.

HIGH-SPEED CHASES, HIGHER DEATH TOLLS

In the past five years, 13 people in southern New Mexico have died in a Border Patrol car chase. It’s a huge uptick from the previous five years, when no such deaths occurred, according to the Southern Border Communities Coalition, a San Diego-based organization of 60 border communities in California, Arizona, Texas and New Mexico.

In that same time period, those four states saw at least 76 fatalities tied to high-speed chases instigated by Border Patrol agents. According to the SBCCC, Border Patrol’s chases are more deadly than its shootings. The chases might be instigated to apprehend undocumented immigrants, but they can end up harming — and killing — U.S. citizens, as well. According to a review of the agency’s own published statements, 23 percent of crash fatalities in New Mexico involve U.S. citizens. And it is likely that these statistics are a significant undercount, since many law enforcement reports don’t reveal the victim’s nationality.

The Border Patrol declined to answer questions from Searchlight New Mexico.
Agent-involved vehicle pursuits have killed 44 people in just the last two years — U.S. citizens and migrants alike, some of whom were innocent bystanders and drivers.

POLICE CAR CHASES KILL SOMEONE ALMOST DAILY
In recent years, high-speed law enforcement chases have come under increasing scrutiny. A 2017 report from the U.S. Department of Justice found that police car chases kill nearly one person every day across the country. National advocacy groups, such as the California-based Pursuit Safety, maintain that car chases should be a last resort — taken only “when there is no other way” to prevent deaths or injuries.

Law enforcement agencies across the country have taken heed, with many backing away from the practice. Numerous police departments in New Mexico — from Las Cruces to Albuquerque — have joined the trend. Las Cruces to Albuquerque — have joined the trend. Las Cruces to Albuquerque — have joined the trend. Las Cruces to Albuquerque — have joined the trend.

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Police car chases kill nearly one person every day across the country.

MOUNTING PRESSURE ON BORDER PATROL
In February, the federal Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties announced it was investigating allegations that Border Patrol agents engage in “unwarranted” high-speed chases. A few months later, Chris Magnus, CBP’s newly appointed commissioner, reportedly said he was working on a new, safer pursuit policy.

But there has been little evidence of progress. Last month, six members of Congress from California, Arizona, Texas and Illinois sent a letter to Magnus, calling the number of dangerous Border Patrol car chases “intolerable.”

“Though these deadly crashes are currently under investigation, we cannot ignore these incidents,” the letter read. “Agent-involved vehicle pursuits have killed 44 people in just the last two years. U.S. citizens and migrants alike, some of whom were innocent bystanders and drivers.”

It’s common in border communities for Border Patrol agents to respond to calls that often have little or nothing to do with immigration. For example, in Las Cruces, which is both New Mexico’s second-largest city and some 50 miles from the border, there can be a lot of overlap between city police and their federal counterparts. The case of Mendez and Acosta is such an example.

And it’s why Sandra Calderon, Acosta’s mother, said she had used an unmarked vehicle to chase a Chevy Tahoe full of undocumented migrants. It then confirmed that two Mexican citizens died on the scene, after being trapped underneath the vehicle. Ten others were taken to hospitals in El Paso.

The ACLU protested the July incident as “extremely disturbing” in a letter to CBP. A pursuit like this “puts not only the occupants of the vehicle at risk, but also passers great danger to the general public,” the letter stated, adding that the crash appeared to have happened in a residential area. “There have already been 17 deaths this year due to Border Patrol vehicle pursuits, while there were 23 last year — an 11-fold increase since 2019.”

LITTLE RECURSSE FOR VICTIMS
Despite the rise in deaths, few cases have resulted in visible consequences for Border Patrol agents. They are rarely terminated for misconduct: Of 1,721 disciplinary actions in 2020, only 29 resulted in removal. The vast majority — nearly 1,600 — came in the form of counseling, reprimands or “non-adverse” suspensions.

After Acosta was killed, the family looked into suing, according to his stepfather, Troy Miller. They spoke to several attorneys who all gave the same advice: “Pretty much, you can’t do anything.”

Inside La Bonita Bakery, the walls are decorated with tributes (“Fly high, Angel”) and symbols of their Catholic faith: crosses, praying hands, saints. They’ve installed a descanso — a roadside cross with wings — near the scene of his fiery death.


“I love you to the moon and back.”

Emiliana Miller, Angel Acosta’s 5-year-old half-sister, clings to a pillow imprinted with his face. “She’s so young,” her mother said, “but I will make sure she never forgets her brother.”

The fact that he was traveling with so much cash.

“I was thinking, holy shit, if he’s not answering … he’s been stopped by Border Patrol with $40,000 cash,” she recalled on a recent evening, speaking from her bakery’s back office.

She said she wasn’t informed about the accident until 12:35 p.m., some eight hours after the fact. Even then, she said, she wasn’t told that he had died.

“We didn’t know where he was and we didn’t know who to contact,” said Calderon, who bears a new tattoo on her right forearm, a pair of praying hands holding a rosary behind a bright red rose. “Fly High Angel Acosta,” the caption reads. The ink under the top layer of her skin is infused with his ashes.
THE IDEA OF PRODUCING TRIGGERS FOR ATOMIC WEAPONS AT LOS ALAMOS HAS Sparked outrage among citizens, nuclear watchdogs, scientists and arms control experts, who say the mission is not safe, necessary or affordable.

LOS ALAMOS — Los Alamos began as an “instant city,” springing from the Pajarito Plateau in 1943 at the dawn of the Atomic Age. More than 8,000 people flocked here to work for Los Alamos National Laboratory and related industries during the last years of World War II.

Now the city may be on the brink of another boom as the federal government moves forward with what could be the most expensive warhead modernization program in U.S. history. Under the proposed plan, LANL will become home to an industrial-scale plant for manufacturing the radioactive cores of nuclear weapons — hollow spheres of plutonium that act as triggers for nuclear explosions. The ripple effects are already being felt.

New housing developments are appearing, one of them about a mile from large white tents that house drums of radioactive waste. Roads will be widened to accommodate 2,500 extra workers. And these are just the signs visible to the public. Within the lab, workers are busy around the clock to get facilities ready to produce the first plutonium core next year.

The cores — known as pits — haven’t been mass-produced since the end of the Cold War. But in 2018, under pressure from the Trump administration, the federal government called for the production of at least 80 new plutonium pits per year by 2030, conservatively expected to cost $9 billion — the lion’s share of a $14.8 billion weapons program upgrade. After much infighting over the massive contract, plans call for Los Alamos to manufacture 30 pits annually and for South Carolina’s Savannah River Site to take the remaining 50.

The idea of implementing this nuclear program at Los Alamos has sparked outrage among citizens, nuclear watchdogs, scientists and arms control experts, who say the mission is not safe, necessary or affordable. Producing pits at Los Alamos would force the lab into a role it isn’t equipped for — its plutonium facilities are too small, too old and lack important safety features, critics say.

The lab has a long history of nuclear accidents that have killed, injured and endangered dozens, if not scores, of people. As recently as January, the National Nuclear Security Administration, the federal agency in charge of the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile, launched an investigation into a Jan. 7 leak at the lab that released radioactive material and contaminated six workers.

“We have a goal that’s not based in any real necessity, and that goal is leading to a rushed and therefore more expensive plan that’s more likely to fail,” said Stephen Young, an arms control and international security expert with the Union of Concerned Scientists.

Criticism of the project has been so widespread that some believed it might even be tabled. Then came the war in Ukraine.

“I would have said pre-Ukraine there was a chance it would have been shut down.” Young said. But once the war started, politicians and military leaders argued that the United States must build up its nuclear weapons cache in the event of a showdown with Russia.

Support for the project comes from other corners, as well. The federal government has been trying to reestablish pit production for decades, calling it essential for national security. New Mexico politicians have fought hard for the billions of dollars and thousands of well-paying jobs the mission is promised to bring. And the lab insists that manufacturing the pits will be safe and successful.

TRIPLING AN ATOMIC GOAL

Los Alamos National Laboratory produced the first plutonium pits as part of the Manhattan Project in 1945. One of these pits triggered the atomic bomb detonated at the Trinity Site in southern New Mexico, another triggered the bomb called Fat Man that destroyed Nagasaki.

Since the end of World War II, however, pit production at Los Alamos has largely been limited to research and design purposes. At most, the lab has produced 11 in a single year. Now the goal is to nearly triple that number.

The lab “was never designed for this purpose,” said Greg Mello, one of the project’s most vociferous and influential critics. “It’s not yet been made safe and may never be safe.”

Mello and his wife, Trish Williams-Mello, have been meticulously monitoring the lab for more than 30 years and have opposed pit production from the beginning. The project would harm nearby Pueblos and communities and is entirely unnecessary, they argue.

Within LANL’s cramped, outdated facilities, plutonium pit production would require a huge influx of staff. Mello notes. To meet production goals, some 2,500 technicians, security forces, facility operators, craft workers, engineers, scientists, professional staff and others would have to perform what he describes as “a ballet of complexity,” working day and night.

Fatigue from graveyard shifts can have serious consequences to security, safety, production, and cost,” the Oak Ridge National Laboratory reported in 2020. The report pointed to shift work as a contributing factor in the 1979 reactor meltdown at Three Mile Island, the worst nuclear power plant accident in U.S. history.

“It’s proven that work on the graveyard shift is more dangerous,” Mello said. “People are just not at their best.”

Other potential risks are spelled out in federal reports, independent assessments, studies by the National Nuclear Security Administration and by LANL itself. Among them:

• In 2020, the Government Accountability Office issued a withering report about the project, noting that the National Nuclear Security Administration — the agency that oversees LANL — has already spent billions of dollars and more than 20 years trying and failing to reestablish pit production. During that time, LANL twice had to suspend operations due to pervasive safety issues, including a nearly four-year shutdown that ended in 2016.

• In 2018, LANL itself reported that the lab is only “mar-
Trish Williams-Mello and Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group

• Between 2005 and 2016, the lab’s “persistent and promised. originally capable” of producing 30 pits per year by 2026, as promised.

• A 2017 assessment by the National Nuclear Security Administration determined that relying solely on Los Alamos for pit production presented an “unacceptably high mission risk.” As a result of that assessment, the lab was taken out of the running for the pit project. It took intensive lobbying from New Mexico’s Congressional delegation over the next months before the federal government chose Los Alamos to share the mission with the South Carolina facility.

• Between 2005 and 2016, the lab’s “persistent and serious shortcomings in criticality safety” — involving potentially lethal nuclear reactions — was criticized in more than 40 reports by government agencies, safety experts and lab staff, an investigation by the Center for Public Integrity found.

Officials at LANL declined to respond to Searchlight New Mexico’s multiple requests for an interview about these issues. Jennifer Talhelm, a LANL spokesperson, instead provided a written statement.

“The Laboratory is working to modernize facilities and hire new employees to begin pit production in support of our national security mission to ensure the safety and reliability of the nation’s nuclear weapons stockpile…We have the only facility in the country where this work is currently possible,” she wrote. “In 2018, NNSA completed an engineering assessment and workforce analysis of the site and found that it can safely meet the requirements of NNSA’s goal of producing at least 30 pits per year.”

A RESIDENT SKEPTIC

Greg Mello and his wife don’t agree with the lab’s assertions about its safety and capabilities. In their view, the project is folly. They also know that stopping it is possible, having played a role in blocking other nuclear-warhead projects at LANL.

The couple’s Albuquerque office is crammed with documents obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests and leaks from within federal agencies. In one case, Mello recalled, they used a stick to open an envelope in the yard, not knowing what was inside — it turned out to be a paper from a Pentagon source identified only as “Dienekes.”

Mello’s background is in engineering, and he studied regional economics and environmental planning at Harvard. In 1989, he founded the nonpartisan Los Alamos Study Group, which has given briefings to the Department of Energy, the National Nuclear Security Administration and others on Capitol Hill.

Pit production at LANL is an accident waiting to happen, he believes. “We have no idea, really, what will be the straw that breaks the camel’s back,” he said. “But there are many possibilities.”

History illustrates a number of them. In 2011, for example, carelessness nearly led to catastrophe when technicians placed eight rods of plutonium side by side to snap a photo of them. This violated a fundamental rule of plutonium. When too much is put in one place it can begin to react uncontrollably, generating a burst of lethal radiation. Engineers in charge of worker safety at LANL resigned en masse after the incident, alleging that the lab prioritized profits over safety. The result was the nearly four-year shutdown that ended in 2016.

Mello also worries about the impacts on local communities, housing and transportation. There’s no workable strategy to get 2,500 more workers — including approximately 1,500 commuters — to the lab every day, he said (Proposed plans include expanding bus service and parking spots, and encouraging more walking and bicycling for the small percentage of lab workers who live nearby).

Many lab workers already have to commute, some from great distances, and this isn’t expected to change much. “Some people travel a hundred miles, which is a little crazy to think of every day,” said Randall Ryti, chair of the Los Alamos County Council.

OPPOSING FORCES

Why are pits needed for nuclear weapons in the first place? Like nearly everything about the project, the question provokes sharply divergent answers.

Nuclear scientists and national laboratories argue that pits in the U.S. arsenal will be stable and effective for more than a century. Military officials counter that the pits are degrading and must be replaced swiftly.

There is an urgent need to “modernize the nuclear triad” because of the war in Ukraine, as Admiral Charles Richard, commander of the U.S. Strategic Command, told the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services on March 8. Only a few times in U.S. history has the crisis been so acute, Richard said.

New Mexico lawmakers, for their part, have fought hard for the project because of acute economic need. Indeed, the New Mexico delegation argued (unsuccessfully) that the state should be allowed to manufacture all 80 pits by itself, instead of sharing the mission with the South Carolina facility.

The money at stake is staggering. The project will cost at least $9 billion for a decade of work at the two sites, according to the most recent federal estimate. Up to $3.9 billion of that will go to LANL for its 30 pits per year. The eventual cost could be significantly higher, however, potentially reaching $18 billion over a decade, Arms Control Today reported.

In a poor state like New Mexico, it’s not easy to turn down that kind of money. But the impacts aren’t as positive as politicians might suggest. For one, funding for LANL tends to stay in Los Alamos County — already the wealthiest in the state — resulting in a large wealth gap with surrounding areas.

In fact, LANL’s existence has had a negative economic impact on nearby Santa Fe, Taos and Rio Arriba counties, a state report found in 2019. Los Alamos County reaps taxes on lab workers’ labor and benefits from their spending. But the enrichment doesn’t necessarily trickle down to other locales.

The vast funds at stake may also increase the risks associated with the project. The federal government awards contract funds to LANL depending on whether it achieves production goals, which currently call on the facility to start making plutonium cores in 2023. This gives the lab an incentive to meet the goals, perhaps even if it is not doing so safely.

Stopping the pit project is an urgent matter for all these reasons, critics say. If it proceeds, it will cement New Mexico’s status as a “nuclear colony and sacrifice zone,” activists add.

In 2023, the chorus of resistance will likely grow louder. Whether Washington hears it is anyone’s guess.
SEARCHING ON THEIR OWN

A Navajo-led search and rescue group looks for missing and murdered indigenous people — going where no one else will.
I never thought I would be asking Bernadine for help.”

Beyale, a search and rescue expert, is being asked for help more and more often these days. For the past four years, she has made it her mission to find missing and murdered Indigenous women and their relatives, a movement shorthanded as MMIWR. Fueled by frustration at the slow response from law enforcement, she has stepped in where few have ventured.

When she started out, it was “just me, them”—she points to her two dogs—and “the family,” she says. Together, they’ve found the remains of five people, one of whom had been missing, she says, for several months. In 2022, she founded 4 Corners K-9 Search and Rescue, a nonprofit that searches for disappeared Native men, women and children on tribal and surrounding lands.

Today, the team consists of Beyale and seven other women, some certified in search and rescue techniques. Some travel from as far away as Phoenix to conduct day-long searches. Some have their own missing loved ones. All volunteer their time while juggling full-time jobs, school or motherhood.

This year alone, the team has received 36 calls for help, 23 of which led to official search parties. Most of the calls were for missing men.

Beyale sees herself as part investigator, part grief counselor and part advocate. “I keep telling [law enforcement], ‘I’m wearing all of these hats—where are the rest of you that should be helping these families?’

‘CAN YOU HELP US?’

The daughter of former Navajo Police officers in Crownpoint, a remote community in McKinley County, Beyale, 42, once thought of becoming a police officer herself. But after witnessing the hardships her parents endured—patrolling hundreds of miles, constrained by a lack of resources and staff—she opted for a college degree in accounting and business.

She lives in Farmington, an oil and gas town just east of the Navajo Nation, which stretches 27,000 square miles across Arizona, Utah and New Mexico. When she’s not working as a supervisor in a coal mine, she’s looking for missing people on the vast tribal lands.

The mother of a senior high school student and a college athlete, she is constantly missing family dinners. “I get a call from a family. ‘We need help. Can you help us?’” Beyale says. “Just like officers and firefighters I’ve missed out on a lot.”

Until 2019, she never thought of herself as an advocate for the MMIWR movement. Back then, she was volunteering with a search and rescue group in New Mexico, helping find lost hikers, climbers and skiers—aided by Trigger, her well-trained German shepherd.

Then an elderly Navajo couple from Shiprock approached her with a different kind of request. They were desperate to find their missing son and they’d heard Beyale could help track him down with her dog.

“They had been looking for their son for the past four months, and they were not getting help from the Navajo police,” she says. “They did not know what to do, and they were going out doing searches on their own.”

She agreed to help—and after two searches, she discovered the son’s remains by a dirt road near Shiprock.

The phone number of the “lady with her dog” quickly started circulating around the reservation.

THE MMIWR MOVEMENT GROWS

The MMIWR issue was by then gaining national attention, driven by decades of work by community organizers and grieving families. The crisis had been ongoing for years, owing to a justice system plagued by racism, lack of accurate data, limited police staffing, and poor communication between local, state, tribal and federal authorities.

Openning Spread: Family members walk down a dirt road to search for Pepita Redhair, who is missing in Albuquerque.

Above: Team members Bernadine Beyale (right) along with rescue dog Trigger, Candice Perry (center) and Tarah Waeki (far left), walk by family members on a plateau in West Mesa. Photos by Shayla Blatchford.
I keep telling [law enforcement], I’m wearing all the hats — where are the rest of you that should be helping these families? — BERNADINE BEYALE

Law enforcement agencies have yet to consolidate a comprehensive tracking system, which means they only have rough and outdated estimates of the number of people missing. But even without reliable numbers, the reports that exist are distressing.

Murder is the third-leading cause of death among American Indian and Alaska Native women — almost three times higher than the rate for non-Hispanic white women, studies show. More than 5,700 Indigenous women and girls were reported missing as of 2016, according to the National Crime Information Center. But only 116 of those cases were lodged with the National Information Clearinghouse and Resource Center for Missing, Unidentified, and Unclaimed persons. The discrepancy occurred even though both entities are divisions within the U.S. Department of Justice.

Here in New Mexico and across the Navajo Nation, at least 192 Indigenous men, women and children are confirmed missing, according to an FBI report in October. Yet that report lacks such key information as the per person of change, even though both entities are divisions within the U.S. Department of Justice.

LOOKING FOR RYAN TOM

The family of Ryan Tom describes him as sweet, friendly and funny. “He is too nice of a guy for anyone to want to harm him,” says Steven Tom, who refuses to talk about his older brother in the past tense.

But the area where Tom Ryan was last seen — the windmill near the Arizona-Utah border — has become increasingly dangerous. Remote and unpatrolled, it is a perfect spot for drug use and bootlegging, Beyale says. Local residents have told her they don’t leave their houses at night, fearing for their safety.

After the Tom family filed a missing-persons report, officers from the Navajo Nation Police Department in Shiprock went to the area and met with them. Two months later, the police reported that the case had been reassigned to a new officer.

“Only the time we saw an officer out here was the first day,” says Rosina Brown, Tom’s aunt. “I know we are not the only family. There are lots of families that have relatives missing, and I don’t know why they don’t update the families.”

Daryl Noon, the Navajo Nation’s Chief of Police says the agency is required to update families about their cases every three months to let them know they haven’t been forgotten. He acknowledges that this doesn’t always happen.

“That is one of the most important things that we haven’t been good at, keeping in touch with the families.” Noon says. “For most of the officers, they don’t know what it feels like. I’m trying to get them to put themselves in the shoes of the family and stop treating calls just like calls.”

Noon says he was assured a canine police officer would be present during the search party on behalf of Ryan Tom’s family, and he was surprised to find out that an officer never showed up.

TURNING TO BEYALE

This latest search represents one of countless times the Tom family has gone looking for Ryan. They’ve scouted around the Red Mesa Chapter House on ATVs, searched a nearby solar energy plant and looked along County Road 443, which divides Utah and Arizona. Finally, empty-handed, they turned to Bernadine Beyale.

Though her team is all-volunteer, these search parties don’t come cheap. A single search can cost up to $1,000 for food, fuel, medical supplies, printouts and electrolyte drinks. Beyale relies on community donations to cover expenses; searches are always conducted free, she says, for families with missing loved ones.

Recently, she and her team assisted the Blackfeet Nation to map out a digital map for the families, who can share this information with police if they wish. The only exception is when human remains are found: In those cases, Beyale contacts law enforcement directly.

Judging by their size, however, these bones belong to an animal. Beyale knows this is always a possibility, but even when searches turn up false positives, the search work is helpful.

“If I don’t find anything out here at least I’m canceling out an area.”

New Mexico ranks number one in the country for having the highest number of confirmed missing and murdered cases in urban areas involving Indigenous people, according to a 2018 report by the Seattle-based Urban Indian Health Institute. Albuquerque has the second-highest number of MMIWR cases after Seattle.
WHAT IT COSTS TO DO INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

COVERING NEW MEXICO WILDFIRES IN 2022

Staff reporter (partial salary), $54,000
Editor (partial salary), $10,500
Photo and video production, $6,600
Travel, $4,500
Web production and promotion, $5,250
Misc. expenses (fire protection gear, public records, etc.), $3,250

TOTAL COST: $83,950
Which paid for reporting, editing, photography, fact-checking, and more.

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