JOURNALISM IN THE TIME OF COVID

2020 WAS AN UNFORGIVING YEAR. Searchlight New Mexico saw the writing on the wall back in early March, when one of our staffers returned from a journalism conference in New Orleans and learned that he may have been exposed to a mysterious virus. He quarantined. We closed our office in downtown Santa Fe, began working remotely—and almost immediately pivoted our focus from child well-being to the coronavirus and its effects on our state.

The stories collected here reflect that shift. We conceived and introduced a series that would chronicle the impact of COVID-19 on five towns across the state. Calling it Hitting Home, we imagined it as a living history of the pandemic. What we didn’t foresee is how deeply the virus would divide our state—how differently New Mexicans would respond to the same stresses. Masks vs anti-masks. Social distancing vs indoor dining. A mere 273 miles separate Santa Fe from Carlsbad, but it might as well be 10,000.

Even within the same community—and not only because of the coronavirus—we’ve seen divisions. In Shiprock, an audacious network of illegal, industrial-sized marijuana farms drove traditional Navajo corn farmers to rise up, patrolling the roads with rifles and baseball bats. Searchlight’s reporters exposed the foreign investors who brought more than 1,000 Chinese laborers to the high desert—and then abandoned them as the operation collapsed.

Searchlight was founded three years ago with a mandate: to be fearless, produce stories that have impact, and help change the lives of New Mexicans for the better. I believe we’ve more than met those goals, thanks to our small, intrepid staff.

Our stories this year have triggered numerous state and federal investigations—including at least three looking into potential human trafficking and labor exploitation on the Navajo Nation. Another article generated the kind of impact most journalists only dream of: A Navajo elder and her granddaughter received indoor plumbing as a direct result of its publication. Yet another piece inspired policy change, when lawmakers worked to rein in some of the most dangerous practices in New Mexico classrooms: restraint and seclusion.

This magazine contains many of our best and most important stories of the year. We hope it inspires and moves you. You have my pledge that we will strive to do even better in 2021.
CONTRIBUTORS

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Older generations on the Navajo Nation have passed down stories of scourges, resilience — and survival. New generations are bringing the tales to life.

BY SUNNIE R. CLAHCICHLIGI | JUNE 3, 2020
or and high desert in northwest New Mexico, where potatoes on Yellow Wash Farm.

what was left of daylight in early May to plant onions and Route 491 in northern Navajo, a group of young Diné used— Four miles down Farm Road, just off U.S. SHIPROCK Zefren Anderson points with his hoe on a farm where he’s planting food in Shiprock.

came a hotspot seemingly overnight.

the vast reservation, from outposts in Arizona to the mesas hundreds of Shiprock residents who’d been tested for COVID-19; By month’s end, the Navajo Nation would have theNavajo Nation, where generations of families have lacked running water, food, electricity, indoor plumbing, safe housing and access to health care — the basic necessities for fighting disease.

GUIDANCE FROM THE PAST

While the staggering numbers have left many feeling hopeless, some in Shiprock have found solace by looking to history, traditions and family stories to push back against the pandemic. They are returning to a way of life depicted in tales passed down by elders, generation after generation.

Anderson, 38, a weaver and self-proclaimed family historian, has lately revisited the tales his paternal grandmother told him about the early 1900s, when thousands of Navajo were lost to the flu and other scourges. The Diné learned to fend off the plagues by practicing social distancing, washing their hands and whispering with their heads down to keep outbreaks from spreading. They learned to leave supplies for families and neighbors at the gates of their homes.

“Shiprock was always the epicenter for big disease outbreaks in the last 100 years — the Spanish flu, different types of lung diseases, meningitis,” Anderson said. “I was ready to go if it was going to be my time.” He wrote. “But apparently there are more weavings to be woven and more fields to be planted.”

FIGHTING TO SAVE LIVES

Shiprock, in many ways, is more fortunate than other chapters, as the small communities on the Navajo Nation are known. With an estimated 8,300 residents, it is the reservation’s largest chapter. Home to the Northern Navajo Medical Center, an Indian Health Service hospital with an emergency room and a handful of ICU beds. (Elsewhere, the nearest 24-hour hospital might require a four-hour drive across terrain too rough for an ambulance.)

Thirty to 40 percent of homes on the Navajo Nation don’t have basics like electricity, indoor toilets, cell phone service or computers, studies show. Many of the 110 chapters are so remote, they’re little more than a scattering of mobile homes along treacherous dirt roads. Shiprock, by comparison, has a grocery store with fresh produce, a handful of local businesses that have survived for generations.

Today, most residents live in government housing, in overcrowded houses and singlewides, many generations of a family live together, sometimes along with friends. Doubling up is a way of life in a place where there is too little housing. An open-door policy is part of tradition.

Anderson’s home was also open to extended family. He believes he might have been infected by a relative who had contact with a healthcare worker, a viral daisy chain
he never could have predicted. He is relying on family and friends to drop off supplies and food. As in the old days, they are leaving them by the gate.

SEEDS OF THE PAST
Just south of Yellow Wash Farm, Gloria Emerson, 82, shuffles toward a pile of red bricks tainted with graffiti, at what was once known as the Bureau of Indian Affairs compound. The bricks are all that is left of the apartment she once shared with her parents on the top floor.

After graduating from high school, Emerson left Shiprock to get a college degree. She returned home and worked in social services on the Navajo Nation, launching an expansive career devoted to education, art and Navajo communities. She attended Harvard University, where she received a master’s degree in educational administration. She returned to Shiprock again in 2000, to help her aging parents.

Emerson eventually took over their farm in east Shiprock at mile marker 31, the last farm before leaving the reservation. She planted corn, melons and alfalfa when she could. This season, she had to hold off due to the pandemic. “There’s a lot of beautiful memories here,” she said. “I always thought Shiprock represented the love and passion for the river and planting.”

The BIA compound where she grew up once looked like a mini college campus, with administrative offices around a quadrangle of lawn and trees. But as the old Shiprock closed, so did its relationship with the federal government. Washington historically has declined to address the reservation’s crumbling infrastructure and health disparities. At least one in five Navajo has diabetes. Heart disease and cancer are widespread, due to entrenched poverty, subpar health care, a scarcity of healthy food and contamination from uranium mines, among many ills. Gov-ernment foot-dragging is endemic.

“They’re incredibly slow, and it’s not just the BIA. I think it’s the Navajo tribe, the chapters — there’s something very wrong with the way we’re governing ourselves,” Emerson said.

The pandemic laid bare the problems. The Navajo Nation was forced to wait six weeks before receiving the federal aid promised in the CARES Act, signed by President Trump in late March. The tribal government finally got word in early May that it would receive a portion of its rightful $600 million. The Navajo and more than a dozen other tribes had to sue the federal government to get the proper funding in the first place.

“It’s shameful that the first citizens of this country are having to fight over and over for what is rightfully ours,” Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez said.

The delayed aid left people scrambling for already scarce supplies of water, soap, food, propane, personal protective equipment and other essentials. During the weeks of waiting, the number of positive cases on the reservation skyrocketed.

Emerson despairs at the destruction the virus has caused, and the lives lost. One of the few remaining members of her family, she spends most of her time alone, isolated on the farm.

“I can’t stand being here isolated — I can’t stand it,” she said. “It’s so hard to see and to have our relatives go on.” She misses the old days, the bustle of Shiprock, the company of other people. How could this have happened so quickly? “I wonder,” she says. “A lot of it is, I think that our people just don’t understand the dangers, and a lot of us just ignored the early signs.”

SIDELINED WARRIORS
Duane “Chili” Yazzie, president of the Shiprock Chapter of the Navajo Nation, sits in his ceremonial hogan outside Shiprock.

Early May mornings were still too crisp for Yazzie to tuck in the first seeds of planting season in his farm near Ditch Number Eight. Yazzie, 70, who is in his third term as Shiprock Chapter president, has spent every day at home since March 30, when the Navajo Nation stay-at-home order was put in place and tribal government offices closed.

He can’t remember the last time he was sidelined or the community shut down. “Never,” Yazzie said.

Planting gives him time to think.

“For the first time in a long time I’m a farmer again,” he said, gazing out the window toward his fields. “As a community leader it’s overwhelming to know that there’s very little that you can do proactively to prevent or mitig-ate the impact of the virus. We’ve just been scrambling around doing what we can, trying to keep people from not going hungry and making sure they’re OK.”

The virus has left people feeling paralyzed. They are supposed to stay home, but they’re at risk when they’re inside, crowded next to generations of family members. They’re afraid to leave home but they need to leave to get water, food and medicine, and take care of sick relatives.

There are grimmer problems, as well. Those whose loved ones die are forced to speed up the mourning process or scratch it altogether. Funeral services are in disarray. At one recent service, only five family members were allowed to attend, including women who had to carry the heavy caskets, typically a job for men.

Funeral homes are known to take advantage of the grieving, who can end up agreeing to services and ex- pensive caskets they can’t afford. Some family members end up doing things like dressing the body and driving the casket to the grave themselves. Worse, those who go to funerals aren’t allowed to hug each other for comfort. They’re expected to grieve at six-foot distances.

Chapters are like large families, almost everyone is connected by friendship or kinship. That means almost everyone in Shiprock knows someone who has struggled with COVID-19 or died from it.

Yazzie refuses to give in. He knows that the most vulner-able people — the elderly — don’t speak English and don’t have the internet or social media to turn to for the latest news and instructions. So far, he’s preparing a recording that explains safety precautions and relief efforts in Diné, the Navajo language. He sends it to the local radio station to play throughout the week.

To address local worries about dwindling food supplies, he encourages people to return to farming, canning and traditional ways of storing food.

“It’s been a time of great reflection, of trying to under-stand why this is happening,” Yazzie said. “He’s come to the conclusion that he’s heard from traditional Navajos. The world is in a great disorder; the equilibrium of the Earth is greatly upset.”

Perhaps the pandemic is the great discipline whip of the Earth, from having irretrievably damaged the Earth,” he said, and paused to search for the right words. “This virus is a force to be reckoned with.” He offered. “It is alive with death.”

Gloria Emerson beside the San Juan River near her home in Shiprock.
Old Town’s heyday abruptly ended with the arrival of the railroad in 1879. The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad built its tracks and depot not in Old Town, but on the east side of the river, about a mile from the plaza. The arrival of “El Diablo,” as the locals dubbed the first locomotive, triggered a flurry of development in what was soon an entirely new city — New Town.

What resulted was one of the state’s most infamous racial divides. Old Town, later named West Las Vegas, remained almost entirely Hispanic; New Town, or East Las Vegas, was Anglo. The segregation would ease in the ensuing decades, but the two cities would remain separate for 90 years, complete with separate fire and police departments, schools and municipal governments.

SWINDLERS, MURDERERS AND THIEVES

The trains brought other turmoil, too. As the railroad arrived, so did outlaws, scoundrels, swindlers and murderers. Jesse James and Billy the Kid were among the visitors. Doc Holliday had a dental office in town. For a time, vigilantes...
It’s always drawing me back.” For a while he wound up in federal prison, doing time for a 1994 bank robbery in Albuquerque. He met his wife Angie, also a Las Vegas native, through letters she sent him when he was in lock-up. They’ve been married now for almost 10 years.

LAYOFFS AND LOCKDOWNS
Lyster is eager to get back to work, as are thousands of other unemployed New Mexicans. But San Miguel County has been particularly hard hit by the pandemic: It experienced a more than 1,800 percent jump in new unemployment claims — from 13 to 252 — between March 14 and March 28, according to the New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions.

The county’s largest employers include public schools, New Mexico Highlands University and the New Mexico Behavioral Health Institute, a state-run psychiatric hospital that opened in 1889 as the New Mexico Insane Asylum. The coronavirus hasn’t sparked major layoffs at these places.

But many jobs have been shed in small businesses, restaurants, bars, motels and hotels.

The Castañeda Hotel, lovingly refurbished and reopened in 2019, was intended to be the centerpiece of an economic renaissance, with 20 rooms overlooking the historic railroad. Owner Allan Affeldt spent $5 million to rehabilitate the 1898 structure. The state’s shutdown orders closed it from mid-March to May 18; today, it is operating at 50 percent capacity, as allowed by the state.

Louie Trujillo, Las Vegas’ new mayor, has been painfully aware of the toll. Sworn in on April 1, amid the pandemic, he watched as several local businesses closed permanently. He’s determined not to let the list grow. “We are open for business,” he declared in early May.

But the city wouldn’t officially open until nearly June, when the state’s lockdown orders eased.

SOCIAL ANIMALS IN CRISIS
Not much has changed since the town began to reopen. There are more people outside, because “we’re social animals,” said City Manager William Taylor. But many people are still hesitant about going indoors. And for some business owners, reopening at a fraction of their capacity just isn’t worth it. “I don’t think this will be the case in our community, but nationally they say that probably 30 percent of restaurants will never reopen,” Taylor said.

Affeldt, the hotel owner, still thinks the city’s historic renovations will pay off. Las Vegas will get its “little renaissance” when things normalize, he said. “Historical data shows that after a crisis, people want to go out to eat and travel.”

Baca wants to believe that’s true. “People might say, ‘I want to be in a small town where there’s not as much risk.’” But as he stands outside his darkened movie house, he’s not sure whether history will let Las Vegas off the hook. “We’ve borne the brunt of historical changes from the beginning.”

dragged inmates out of jail and hanged them at a windmill in the town’s now tranquil plaza.

Order was eventually restored, but by the 1900s Las Vegas was losing ground on other fronts. The rise of automobiles, the birth of the Interstate Highway system in the 1950s and the decline of the railroads battered the economies in railroad towns like Las Vegas, where many historic structures were shuttered.

The buildings’ old-time facades made them popular in Hollywood. Hit movies and TV shows were filmed in town, from Easy Rider and No Country for Old Men to Longmire.

But the populace had a baked-in wariness of strangers coming to town, whether industrial or human. Revitalization efforts haven’t always been popular.

“Some people are flat out against tourism,” Baca said. “They don’t want gentrification.”

For three months after becoming the editor of the twice-weekly Las Vegas Optic last year, Phil Scharer, 24, received letters calling him a cockroach and telling him to move back to Missouri. Las Vegas locals are “not super accepting of people from the outside,” he said.

“BOTH AND NEITHER”

The expense of running two small municipalities on either side of a waterway began to look less and less practical. In 1970, the two Las Vegases unified into one, but, Baca said, “racial tensions continued to fester.”

Lyster knows the history well. His grandfather served as the city’s mayor from 1972 to 1974, and he embodies both sides of the divide. His dad played football at Robertson High School in New Town, his mom was a cheerleader at West Las Vegas High School in Old Town.

“I’m half white and half Mexican,” he said. “I fit into both and neither.”

An imposing 6-foot-5, Lyster said he’s been trying to escape Las Vegas his whole life, but “it’s like a magnet:
Welcome to Carlsbad, one of the most defiant and incongruous places in New Mexico. It is a Republican stronghold in a blue state—a speck in the Chihuahuan Desert with outsized clout. Nothing about it suggests vast wealth. But it sits atop one of the most productive oil fields in the world. And didn’t ease them until June. That didn’t sit right with New Mexicans. It is a Republican stronghold in a blue state—a speck in the Chihuahuan Desert with outsized clout. Nothing about it suggests vast wealth. But it sits atop one of the most productive oil fields in the world.

VIRUS STALLS “MOONSHOT” By March, the price of crude was plummeting. By April, the price of oil nosedived below zero for the first time in history. As the virus spread and oil wells kept disappearing, New Mexico’s windfall vanished, leaving the state with a $2 billion budget shortfall.

Lawmakers watched in horror as the COVID-19 pandemic thrust the world’s oil markets into chaos. Oil and gas businesses in other states laid off more than 100,000 workers, tried to calm investors and, in some cases, went bankrupt. And State Sen. John Arthur Smith, the outgoing conservative Democrat who for 31 years held a tight leash over New Mexico’s budget, had one last opportunity for an I-told-you-so. “The moonshot was quite frankly a fiasco, given a revenue stream that relies on oil and gas,” he said.

In keeping with its contrary nature, Carlsbad has weathered the crisis relatively unscathed. Mayor Dale Janway gave a running commentary on the city’s health while giving a tour through town. “Oil prices are trending, and we’re seeing more traffic,” he said, motioning out the window. It was May, and New Mexicans were supposed to be sheltering in place and wearing masks in public, but Carlsbad was full of bare faces. Janway wore a mask until he got into the pickup truck with reporters and immediately took it off. “We’re also still seeing a lot of growth and development around town,” he said.

There have been oil worker layoffs, but most have fallen on transient workers from out of state, according to New Mexico’s petroleum trade association. Locals who lost their jobs quickly found work in the city’s restaurants and shops—a fact underscored by Eddy County’s May unemployment rate of 5.6 percent, one of the lowest in New Mexico and about half the rate in Texas oil towns.

So why do Carlsbad residents wish they lived in the Lone Star state? Trujillo, like a lot of people in town, is riled about New Mexico’s reaction to the virus. In keeping with their conservative political bent, many residents believe that COVID-19 has been overblown and that Texas, with its relaxed public health restrictions and swift reopening, is taking the right course. The recent surge of novel coronavirus cases in Texas—an increase traced directly to the early reopening—has done little to dampen their admiration.

In the past two weeks, Texas has become a pandemic epicenter, reporting more than 6,000 cases in a single day, triple the number seen in previous weeks. Cases in Carlsbad and the wider Eddy County area have also been spiking, likely due to travel to and from Texas, health officials said.

Dale Balzano, a retired teacher and coach who in 2007...
turned an old bank into a boutique hotel and restaurant called The Trinity, said that compared to Texas, New Mexico is a “hard place to do business.” The governor was picking winners and losers. Major corporations and box stores like Lowe’s were allowed to stay open, he said, while the little stores were forced to close. Balzano said he comes from a long line of Democrats and labor union organizers. “But this governor scares the heck out of me.”

Lujan Grisham’s aggressive public health response has scored her significant political points on the national stage and was among the reasons she made the vice presidential shortlist. But it earned her few brownie points in Carlsbad and Eddy County. In early May, county commissioners drove that point home by voting to sue the governor, claiming that her emergency orders infringed on civil liberties and free trade.

And after Lujan Grisham ordered masks to be worn in public to stem the spread of coronavirus, Eddy County Sheriff Mark Cage publicly refused to enforce it. “This is America,” Cage told the Carlsbad Current-Argus. The sheriff and his deputies would not be wearing masks. Cage said, and if that made anyone nervous, “then you have the right to move away from me.”

POTASH, CAVERNS AND NUKES
More than 100 years ago, Anglo settlers dammed the Pecos River and diverted the water into the surrounding plains, creating an oasis of green farmland in the mostly parched desert. In 1925, a surveyor looking for oil instead found the salt formations deep underground. The plant, which shut down from 2014 to 2017 due to a radioactive leak, has put New Mexico in the rarefied domain of underground extraction technologies, making it economical to extract oil and gas deposits that had previously been too costly to reach. The results were staggering. Between 2009 and 2019, New Mexico’s oil production increased 400 percent, making the state the third-largest oil producer in the nation. The Permian Basin was now generating more oil than most members of OPEC, providing more than 30 percent of all U.S. oil production, studies showed.

In many ways, the boom was more than Carlsbad could handle. “I mean, it just ridiculously overtaxed the infrastructure,” said Jim Winchester, executive director of the Independent Petroleum Association of New Mexico. Carlsbad’s roads were pockmarked with potholes and woefully inadequate to handle the heavy truck traffic that rumbled through day and night, bumper to bumper, during the boom. One road, U.S. Highway 285, earned the moniker “Death Highway” for its sky-high rate of traffic fatalities, many of them caused by oil industry rigs.

“When that road is like dodging bullets every day,” said Trujillo, the local oil worker. The former farming town drew thousands of oil and gas workers from around the country; they made an average of $98,000 a year and lived in local RV parks and modular corporate “man camps.” In recent years the city ballooned to more than 52,000 residents, according to Janway, the mayor. Housing costs in Carlsbad increased, as did oil spills, air pollution and other environmental impacts.

“The Permian boom is a carbon bomb,” said Tom Sing- er, senior policy advisor at the Western Environmental Law Center. Since COVID-19 arrived, oil production has been cut in half. “But even at 50 percent throttle, New Mexico’s addiction to oil revenue is completely unsustainable for those of us who depend on the planet,” he said.

The Permian last year had the worst oil- and gas-related air pollution in the country, according to a 2020 study published in the journal Science Advances. The report concluded that the Permian leaks some 2.7 million metric tons of methane, a powerful greenhouse gas, into the atmosphere every year — the highest rate ever measured from a U.S. oil- and gas-producing region.

“RAINING DOWN CHEMICALS”
In Carlsbad, the environmental dangers came into unusually vivid relief earlier this year when a pipeline owned by Tulsa-based WPX Energy burst open and showered a plume of contaminants on the home where Dee George, his wife, Penny Aucoin, and their two children live.

George, a Navy vet and former school bus driver who still lives on the south side of town where he grew up, has watched as the view from his front yard transformed from farmland and alfalfa fields to a maze of well pads, heavy-duty pipes, valves and flare stacks sprouting from the earth.

On January 21, George and his wife were jolted from bed at 2:30 a.m. by a deafening roar from the well pad just 100 yards from their front porch. When the couple rushed outside, they were doused with produced water, a chemical-laden waste product spewing from the ruptured line.

“It was just raining down chemicals on us,” Aucoin recalled. “It smelled like gas, it was burning our skin and our eyes, and all I could think was ‘Oh my God, my animals!’

The leak went on for almost an hour, and by the time emergency crews shut off the pipeline, the family’s property had been thoroughly soaked in a yellowish fluid. George and Aucoin had to euthanize their chickens and one of their dogs. The couple said they and their children have suffered debilitating health problems ever since.

“You smell that?” George asked on a recent day while standing next to the well pad where the pipeline exploded. A steady has emanated from the wellhead, wafting a strong gas-like odor through the air. “We’re breathing whatever that is every day.”
In Gallup, surrounded by the Navajo Nation, a pandemic crosses paths with homelessness, hate and healers.

Navajo Nation, a land the size of West Virginia with 173,000 residents and only 13 grocery stores. On weekends, the town of 22,000 swells to double or triple its size — almost all from incoming Navajo shoppers. While the 10-day lockdown was deemed necessary for public health, many Navajo interpreted the order as a clear message: Gallup was closed to outsiders. And in Gallup it was clear who that meant.

Lauber’s role touched on one of the town’s most long-running, controversial problems. Alcohol is illegal on the Navajo Nation, but Gallup’s streets are lined with more liquor stores per capita than almost anywhere in the Southwest. This has attracted an unusually large population of homeless people — anywhere from 600 to 1,500 on a given day — a disproportionate number of whom are Navajo.

Some are addicts, and spend daylong benders in town begging for money in parking lots, which is why Gallup has euphemistically referred to this as its “panhandling problem.” But with the pandemic, the panhandlers became a virus-spreading problem. So the town arranged to shelter the homeless in four local hotels, providing them free food and health care.

Some in Gallup didn’t appreciate this deployment of resources. One woman, who described herself as a member of the Osage tribe, captured the disapproval in a letter to the Gallup Sun, saying that “the majority of homeless people” have a family somewhere. Why then, she demanded, “don’t we encourage them to return home?”

VIRAL XENOPHOBIA
In towns that border the Navajo Nation, xenophobia spread alongside the virus. Decades ago, border town restaurants posted signs that read “No dogs or Indians allowed.” Now, in Page, Arizona, police arrested a man who’d urged people through Facebook to use “lethal force” against the Navajo.
Gallup has the highest poverty rate in New Mexico — a state with one of the highest poverty rates in the country.

because they were “100% infected.” An hour away, in Grants, New Mexico, Mayor Martin Hicks told The New York Times, “We didn’t take it to them, they brought it to us.”

Gallup’s rumor mill offered up a similar sentiment.

All around town, people grabbed onto a story of how the spread of the virus was traced to one person: a homeless man, presumed to be Navajo. Police had delivered the man three times in one week to Na’Nizhoozhi Center Inc., a local detox facility, where he came into contact with more than 170 people. That man and the others then passed the virus throughout the community, overwhelming the hospital where Lauber worked, the theory went. Patient records saw virus throughout the community, overwhelming the hospital where Lauber worked, the theory went. Patient records

One patient had already died as a result of what staff physicians called gross mismanagement; another suffered severe brain damage from an improperly adjusted ventilator. As doctors and nurses held protest signs, the area’s state senator, George Muñoz, pleaded to a few news cameras. “I’ve sent a letter to the governor telling her we’re dealing with a health care crisis.” Muñoz said: “I don’t know what else to do but beg.”

Lauber knew he could lose his job for joining the protest. At the hotel, that thought briefly cracked his jovial soulful work for the Navajo man. As he tested patients for the virus every single day — every single day.” Some homeless patients, agitated and unused to being confined to rooms, flying blind.”

Many of Gallup’s decision-makers seemed to be grasping at well-meaning solutions, with little time to weigh unexpected consequences. For example, after the detox center outbreak, the outgoing mayor — Jack McKinney, then in his last month in office — banned liquor sales at the bars that sold to the Navajo. And all these decades ago, he returned to Gallup to look after his mother, and then in his last month in office — banned liquor sales at the bars that sold to the Navajo. And all these decades ago, he returned to Gallup to look after his mother, and

Lauber’s job pleased him at the foot of that question. The 58-year-old is the director of community health at Rehoboth McKinley Christian Healthcare Services, the only general hospital within 110 miles. It had been his job to visit rural communities, and the impoverished towns, hidden in the juniper hills, reminded him of his own childhood home on the reservation.

Lauber studied medicine at the University of Arizona, then worked in private practice in Phoenix. Three years ago, he returned to Gallup to look after his mother, and since returning it seemed that little but the storefronts had changed. In the 1970s, a Native American activist had kid-napped Gallup’s mayor for refusing to limit liquor licenses to the bars that sold to the Navajo. And all these decades ago, he returned to Gallup to look after his mother, and

Watching Lauber, it was easy to forget the pandemic or the virus. Watching Lauber, it was easy to forget the pandemic or the virus.

In late May, Doctors Without Borders, known as Medecins Sans Frontieres in French, had called to congratulate him, then quickly apologized: “We’re closing down your town,” she said. Bonaguidi’s own businesses, including a leather repair shop his Italian immigrant father started in 1924, were forced to lay off employees, almost all of them Navajo. And while it was the previous mayor who requested the lockdown, Bonaguidi couldn’t risk letting thousands of families, including some of his own workers, contract COVID-19 as they shopped in Gallup. So he went along with the decision. “At this point, the virus decides everything,” he said. “We’re all kind of flying blind.”

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THE STATE’S POOREST CITY

Gallup has the highest poverty rate in New Mexico — a state with one of the highest poverty rates in the country. The town is the only economic hub within 100 miles, but after the 2008 recession its retail sector withered. The coal mines that once drew immigrant labor have nearly collapsed. Gallup’s 30-year economic plan now leans heavily on tourism, with the town branding itself a kind of desert trading post, where families can window-shop for Native American jewelry on the historic main street and feel a Native vibe without ever driving onto a reservation.

Gallup’s other major revenue source is the Navajo. Native families who live three hours on average from a grocery store come here to fill their trucks with food, water and supplies. But because of the lockdown, the parking lots at Walmart (one of the busiest in the state), Home Depot, McDonald’s and Taco Bell were empty. As was the historic downtown.

The economic toll was especially troubling for Gallup’s new mayor, Louie Bonaguidi, who was sworn into office on April 30. “This lockdown is killing us,” he said from behind his office desk. “Wearing a belo tie, his hands resting on a newspaper that tallied the latest coronavirus infection rate, he added, “We need to get our businesses open.”

On his first day in office, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham had called to congratulate him, then quickly apologized: “We’re closing down your town,” she said. Bonaguidi’s own businesses, including a leather repair shop his Italian immigrant father started in 1924, were forced to lay off employees, almost all of them Navajo. And while it was the previous mayor who requested the lockdown, Bonaguidi couldn’t risk letting thousands of families, including some of his own workers, contract COVID-19 as they shopped in Gallup. So he went along with the decision. “At this point, the virus decides everything,” he said. “We’re all kind of flying blind.”

Many of Gallup’s decision-makers seemed to be grasping at well-meaning solutions, with little time to weigh unexpected consequences. For example, after the detox center outbreak, the outgoing mayor — Jack McKinney, then in his last month in office — banned liquor sales at convenience stores. When the homeless then turned up at the town’s grocery markets, rather than leaving town to buy alcohol, Gallup called on the National Guard to monitor the parking lots. Bonaguidi now faced similar, unforeseen consequences after the lockdown.

His phone vibrated with calls from angry ranchers whose wire fences were cut as desperate people found backroads into town. Gallup had delivered water to neighboring areas during the lockdown, Bonaguidi said, though even this simple act demanded almost absurd coordination. Since the Navajo Nation is federal land, the U.S. first need-
ANTHONY — On a spring day during the coronavirus lockdown, Fernie Herrera set up an outdoor stove in his spacious backyard. He unfurled the awning on his camper — parked under the pine tree that towers over the family house — and invited his kids and grandkids over for a campout.

If it weren’t for the pandemic, Herrera might have been out fishing or hunting rabbits. Instead, with his daughter and her three children, he ate steak and potatoes inside the camper as if they were camping in the woods.

“With the pine tree there, that was our forest,” he said.

After his daughter left with the kids, his son’s family arrived, extending the day’s activities while being mindful of the state’s prohibitions against large gatherings.

In Southern New Mexico, the lockdown has drawn its share of criticism. Some officials have attacked the state’s mask-wearing mandates as a violation of their God-given rights. But Herrera — a former fire chief who serves as a city trustee and plans to run for mayor — stands behind Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham’s efforts to flatten the curve. “I support masks,” he said. “I support social distancing. Because, you know, in my 74 years of life that I’ve been around, I have seen pandemics. I have seen polio. I had polio when I was in fifth grade.”

Herrera is aware of the economic setbacks that go along with lockdown.

Even in good times, this quiet border town — whose population hovers just under 9,400 — has only a handful of businesses. They include one gas station and a single convenience store whose two refrigerators are stocked with the basics: cheese, eggs, milk, orange juice, soda and a small selection of vegetables. Anthony also is home to Diablo Fireworks, which calls itself the state’s largest fireworks store, but more typical businesses are the lunch trucks selling burritos and tortas, sidewalk fruit vendors, barbers, and financial service offices peddling unsecured loans.

Set amid the dairy farms and pecan orchards of southern Doña Ana County, the city has had some success in attracting young working families to the scores of affordable new homes cropping up around town. But economic growth is always an on-again, off-again affair here. As work life ground to a halt with the lockdown, gross tax revenues and other income plunged. The city government took a hatchet to its $2.7 million budget, cutting spending to just over $1.8 million.

“The health crisis has affected everything,” said City Manager Oscar Dominguez. In 2019, Anthony finished the fiscal year with a $760,000 surplus. This year, even with massive cuts, it will operate with a $1.1 million deficit.

The future, Dominguez said, is “looking bleak.”

IT’S NOT JUST THE VIRUS

Ever since its incorporation 10 years ago, Anthony has strained to gain an economic foothold.

The median household income here is $23,378, and slightly more than 45 percent of the 9,400 residents live below the poverty line, according to U.S. Census data from
City Trustee Fernie Herrera discusses Anthony’s prospects at the kitchen table of his home in town.

2018. Many locals commute to jobs in restaurants and hotels in Las Cruces, half an hour to the northwest, or in El Paso, Texas, about 30 minutes to the southeast. Others work in construction, heavy industry and agriculture. Herrera is a third-generation Anthonyan whose grandparents owned a small farm outside town. He has never forgotten the effect that his bout with polio—the coma, paralysis and six-month recovery—had on his family. His father was a farm laborer, his mother a homemaker who cared for five young children. When disaster struck in 1956, the Herreras relied on the generosity of neighbors to keep gas in the family car so they could drive to Las Cruces, where 10-year-old Fernie lay hospitalized. Polio outbreaks were common in the 1950s. During the epidemic of 1952, nearly 60,000 children were infected around the U.S. and more than 3,000 died. Herrera’s family is taking the pandemic seriously. His grandson Adrian Arias, who just graduated from high school, dreams of young residents who strive to bring college degrees to the city. Unlike Anthony’s population, Anthony, New Mexico, sits next to the city of Anthony, Texas, which has a population of about 5,300. There is no physical division between the two communities; you could blink and not realize you’ve driven from one to the other. But the Texas side looks different. The cars and trucks are just a little bit newer, the houses a bit bigger, the front yards a little greener. The median household income of $35,756 is correspondingly bigger: $12,378 more than Anthony, New Mexico.

Texas Anthony boasts everything New Mexico Anthony craves: shopping centers, truck stops, grocers, restaurants and a Best Western hotel. Teens from both sides of the state line look to the Texas side’s Wet ‘N’ Wild Waterworld for prized summer jobs. A satellite camp of nearby La Tuna Federal Correctional Institution, in Vinton, Texas, houses more than 1,000 male prisoners, locals from both Anthony and El Paso work at the facility.

But New Mexico Anthony shows signs of change. Alma and Adolfo Gallegos moved here from Juárez to join their three grown daughters in 2008. They bought a house where Alma could help care for her five grandchildren while babysitting for other families in town. After a friend encouraged her to apply for a license, she turned her house into an official day care center. Never imagining that with a state quarantine she would find herself busier than ever. When local schools were ordered to close, parents who still had jobs suddenly needed a place to drop their school-age children, and the Gallegos’ living room became a thriving neighborhood day care hub. Now, she envisions expanding the operation. “All I need is to have another person who helps me, but I already have that—it’s my husband,” she said, anticipating the day when Adolfo, who works in construction, will retire.

As the coronavirus spreads across the Southwest, it’s anyone’s guess what the next few months hold in store for Anthony, the one-time colonia that’s tried so hard to modernize and grow.

In the weeks leading up to the reopening, the community was “cabin fever-struck,” according to Herrera. Now “they’re trying to go out there, they’re seeing that their friends or neighbors are not just keeling over and dying, even though they hear it on the TV that there are people dying every day.”

Herrera fears that as the town reopen, there will be serious health consequences. “People that work in El Paso, they’re going to the restaurants and movies and whatever; they’re going to get contaminated. They’re going to come back, pass it on to their families or their friends.”

He worries about his daughter, an emergency room nurse in El Paso.

“She says, ‘Dad, we have two floors of the hospital with people that are dying.’ She’s afraid,” he said. “She’s got three kids. And she’s a single mom. She says ‘Dad, if I get it? I’m broke. I mean, even though I’m a nurse, you know, if there’s no money coming in? What can I do?’”

OPPORTUNITIES DELAYED

Almost equidistant between Las Cruces and El Paso, the community that is now Anthony once hosted 16th-century travelers along the historic Camino Real connecting present-day Santa Fe and Mexico City. About 20 miles from the Mexican border, Anthony remains a quintessential border town. Nearly a third of its residents are immigrants, and most retain ties to Mexico, an estimated 84 percent of residents speak Spanish at home.

Until its incorporation in 2010, the city was designated as one of New Mexico’s 171 colonias—a small, unincorporated border communities that typically suffer from a lack of basic infrastructure. Anthony has modernized considerably over the years. Between 2000 and 2010, its population increased by 18 percent, its rate of growth was among the fastest in the state. But with growth comes a challenge. If, as expected, its population eclipses 10,000 in the 2020 census, Anthony will lose state funds earmarked for colonias and other small cities with populations under 10,000.

The assumption is that a growing population means a growing tax revenue base to replace state assistance. Pre-COVID-19, the city was taking steps to grow those revenues. Mayor Diana Murillo-Trujillo’s administration had developed plans to stretch the city’s border northward toward Las Cruces with the hopes of attracting travelers and new businesses. In January, when the Dos Lagos Golf Course shuttered, the city saw an opportunity and bought the 50-acre property for $3.1 million. The city envisioned selling off parcels for housing development while leaving plenty of room for a new park and recreation center.

Those plans are now on hold.

Between February and May, unemployment rose from 6.3 to 8.5 percent in Doña Ana County. Among New Mexico’s 33 counties, it has the fourth-highest number of COVID-19 cases: 1,233 as of July 7. Since the county registered its first case on March 1, it has seen a steady uptick and 10 deaths. At a meat processing plant in Santa Teresa, 13 miles from Anthony, 57 workers were infected in May and June. On July 6, Doña Ana County registered 85 new positive cases—its largest single-day increase since the outbreak began.

The surge is even greater to the east in Texas and to the south in Mexico’s Chihuahua State, where 539 people have already died in Ciudad Juárez. So far, no one in Anthony has died from the virus. But the encroaching pandemic threatens the little city’s hopes for economic growth, the stability of its working class and immigrant communities, and the dreams of young residents who strive to bring college degrees back to their hometown.

In 2018, the state Department of Health identified Doña Ana County as the third-worst place in New Mexico to be a child. Half of its children live below the federal poverty line, and so many go hungry at home that area schools serve free breakfast and lunch to nearly all students. Poverty contributes to high rates of teen pregnancy and inadequate prenatal care. The majority of 911 calls are for domestic violence.

Nearly half of Anthony’s population is under age 18, but for years the city longed for a modern public playground. Built as the fulfillment of a campaign promise by the mayor, Lil’ Adams Park finally opened two years ago in Adams Ball Park at the center of town. It has two red slides and a jungle gym that’s shaded by a big green awning. During the recent stay-at-home orders, the playground sat empty behind a quickly erected gate wrapped in tattered yellow caution tape.

SAME NAME, DIFFERENT FATE

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2020: A LOOK BACK
ALBUQUERQUE—In late January and early February, American public health experts warned about a possible COVID-19 epidemic, one that would almost certainly require a massive supply of hospital masks, gloves and hand sanitizer.

At the same time, at least two major New Mexico hospitals were throwing those very items into the trash.

“The hospital and the country knew it’s coming. And administration and staff are running around throwing out all sorts of supplies,” said a nurse at Albuquerque’s Presbyterian Hospital, one of the state’s largest medical centers. A 20-year employee of the hospital, she requested anonymity because she had not been authorized to speak to the media.

“It’s sad, it’s horrific,” she said, ticking off a list of what was tossed out: hand sanitizer, masks, intravenous tubing, hospital gowns, bandages. “The whole closet.”

That’s because her hospital at the time thought it had a more immediate concern—an upcoming routine safety inspection by The Joint Commission, a private nonprofit that regularly inspects more than 22,000 American healthcare organizations. A visit from The Joint Commission typically throws hospitals into a state of heightened anxiety.

The Joint Commission, along with other hospital inspectors, wields tremendous sway over the healthcare industry. If a hospital fails an inspection, it risks a huge blow to its reputation and faces the possibility of losing Medicaid reimbursements and other federal health care payments, which would threaten its very existence. That’s particularly concerning in New Mexico, where about 33 percent of residents are enrolled in Medicaid—twice the national rate.

“One thing that can compromise a hospital’s standing with inspectors is the presence of expired supplies—even when those supplies are actually still safe to use. This is why the nurse at Presbyterian was tossing items that were expired, or soon to expire, into the garbage.”

Today, the country is facing shortages of some of the very same personal protective equipment that New Mexico hospital staffers were throwing away. These shortages put health workers at greater risk of catching the coronavirus and spreading it to others. Due to the lack of supplies, masks are now being rationed across the nation, including in New Mexico.

In January and February—as the novel coronavirus began spreading in the United States—three hospitals in Albuquerque were preparing for inspections from The Joint Commission. Searchlight spoke with 11 nurses and doctors from two of the hospitals, Presbyterian and the Veterans Affairs Medical Center. All 11 described the same wasteful behavior.

“To have to deal with a Joint Commission audit at the same time [that we were preparing for a surge of potential COVID-19 patients] compounds the pressure and I think led to more rash and wasteful choices when managers were deciding what to throw out,” said a doctor from Presbyterian who, like all New Mexico health care professionals interviewed for this story, spoke on the condition of anonymity.

On January 30, the World Health Organization declared a “public health emergency of international concern.” On February 7, it sounded the alarm about a critical shortage of supplies, including N95 masks, the standard for health care workers treating patients with infectious diseases like COVID-19.

“COMMON PRACTICE”

The disposal of medical supplies in advance of an inspection is a regular occurrence across the country, according to medical professionals from Florida to California.

“We don’t want trouble,” explained Zachary Deutch, an operating room medical director at University of Florida’s UF Health North. He called it “common practice” to remove supplies that are approaching their expiration date—just in case.

When inspectors arrive, the presence of anything past its printed expiration date—from vaccines to surgical masks to pudding in the fridge—is grounds for discipline. The standards are meant to ensure that patients aren’t harmed by drugs gone bad or equipment that’s falling apart. It’s an...
important concern. All physical items decay. Elastic straps on hospital masks can become brittle over time, rendering the masks ineffective. Thin gloves can wear down in storage, developing holes or tears, making them unusable. “We spend so much time teaching our staff, if it’s expired, you absolutely have to toss it, because it’s a patient safety issue,” said Saskia Popescu, an infectious disease epidemiologist in Phoenix. That makes it challenging, she said, for hospitals to know how or when to change their protocols during a pandemic.

Robert Campbell, director of clinical standards interpretation for hospital and ambulatory programs for The Joint Commission, said in a statement to Searchlight that it’s important for hospitals to remove expired items. But, he added, “The Joint Commission does not look for items or medications that will expire soon.”

**EXPIRED BUT EFFECTIVE**

It’s an open secret, however, that while printed expiration dates are critically important for some medical products, they’re virtually meaningless for others. A 2017 investigation by the news organization ProPublica found that the federal government has long known that some drugs continue to work well beyond their expiration dates, and yet those dates have not been extended.

Six years ago, Deutch wrote a letter to the medical journal Anesthesia & Analgesia, pointing out the absurdity of how expiration dates for some medical supplies are handled. A syringe of one size included an expiration date, he wrote, while a syringe of another size did not. One type of IV tubing included an expiration date, while another, which served the same purpose, had no date. “Attempts to address these conundrums were ultimately fruitless,” he wrote.

In the best of times, tossing supplies might merely be regarded as wasteful and as something that drives up health care costs. But in the worst of times, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, the behavior can contribute to shortages that cost lives.

Health care workers without proper protective equipment are at higher risk for catching COVID-19 and passing it on to others. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 9,200 U.S. health care workers have been infected with the disease. At least 27 have died.

Experts around the country didn’t blame the hospitals, but rather said the wasteful behavior was symptomatic of an even greater problem — a generally uncoordinated government response to COVID-19.

“There was by no means a unanimous call that every hospital should clutch on to every single one of these [N95 masks] as long as possible,” said Michael Barnett, assistant professor of health policy and management at the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health. But, he said, “in hindsight, it certainly seems foolish.”

**N95 MASKS TRASHED**

At Presbyterian Hospital, the nurse of 20 years said she personally threw out boxes of expired N95 masks. She didn’t remember how many. Another nurse and a doctor at Presbyterian told Searchlight that they, too, saw people throwing out N95 masks.

“Before and during the inspection period, I threw out some protective gear, certainly,” said a nurse at the VA, who also requested anonymity. He could not recall specifically what he threw away.

Spokespersons from both hospitals denied that inspections had any impact on their supplies of personal protective equipment and said that they had sufficient inventory.

Presbyterian “reviews inventory in order to remove and dispose of expired, or nearly expired, supplies,” whether or not an inspection is around the corner, said Tim Johnsen, senior vice president for hospital operations.

**REALITY CHECK**

After the inspectors left New Mexico, guidance changed. By the end of February, the CDC said that some expired N95 masks are actually safe to use as a last resort. The Joint Commission curtailed its inspections mid-March, and later wrote on its website that healthcare organizations could now consider using expired masks.

“Somebody gave a reality check when the chips were down,” Deutch said.

He said that such recent admissions should cause the medical profession to reconsider its normal practices.

“We’re used to having an intense amount of waste and excess without any thought of the implications,” Deutch said. Now, the implications are clear. “When there are not a lot of [masks], the rules are out the window. Maybe we shouldn’t have had that rule in the first place.”

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**SCREAMING FOR HELP**

IKE SWETLITZ | JULY 2, 2020

**IMPRISONED MIGRANTS SEEKING BETTER PRISON CONDITIONS DESCRIBE AN ATTACK BY PEPPER-SPRAYING GUARDS**

**ESTANCIA** — The migrants were on a days-long hunger strike when guards entered their prison dormitory in full riot gear — gas masks, shields and canisters of pepper spray.

The officers corralled the two dozen or so inmates into a huddled mass. Two men fell to their knees, begging them not to attack.

“Suddenly, they just started gassing us,” said Yandy Bacalao, a 34-year-old asylum seeker from Cuba. “You could just hear everyone screaming for help.”

At least one person collapsed. Others shouted for air. Bacalao tried to grab a shirt from his bed to put over the mouth of a man who was struggling to breathe. “The
officer sprayed me directly on my face and on my body, and I ran,” Bacallao said. “I felt like I was going to drown.”

The May 14 “attack,” in the words of Bacallao and other migrants, took place at Torrance County Detention Facility, a sprawling complex located about an hour southeast of Albuquerque. Set off from the desert scrub by a tall chain-link fence draped in rolls of razor wire, it is run by CoreCivic, a private prison company, and mostly houses migrants under the custody of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

CoreCivic spokesperson Ryan Gustin confirmed the incident and said, in a written statement, that guards “responded to a protest” and used pepper spray “on a group of detainees who become disruptive by refusing to comply with verbal directives provided by staff.”

Gustin declined to say what the migrants were doing to protest and what “verbal directives” they’d been given. He referred those questions to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which did not respond to a request for comment.

**HUNGER STRIKE PRECEDED ATTACK**

A fuller account came from Bacallao and two fellow detainees, who said the attack came in response to a hunger strike the men launched to protest terrible food and their vulnerability to COVID-19. The men were not detained because they’d been convicted of a crime; instead, like many others in ICE custody, they were in a sort of immigration limbo, being held until the government could figure out what to do with them. They spoke with Searchlight New Mexico through a translator, though only Bacallao agreed to be quoted by name.

“It felt like I had been burned with gasoline,” said one Cuban detainee who, like Bacallao, came to the United States seeking political asylum. “My throat closed, and I just fell on the floor. I couldn’t speak. I didn’t breathe. I thought I was going to die.”

Torrance County officials, who last year negotiated arrangements with CoreCivic and ICE to house migrants at the facility, expressed skepticism about the men’s accounts.

“I suspect there’s more to it than what you’ve been told,” County Manager Wayne Johnson said, adding that he didn’t have confirmation the incident even happened.

Torrance County directly benefited from the presence of the detention center. During the last fiscal year, which ended June 30, the county recorded just over $90,000 in payments from CoreCivic, with more money on the way. Johnson said he expects future annual revenue to be about $130,000.

ICE policy allows the use of pepper spray to “gain control” of a detainee. The policy specifies that detention facilities must keep written and video records of any instance when officers use such physical force. Gustin declined to share any documentation of the Torrance County incident.

**A NATIONAL PATTERN EMERGES**

It is one in a series of many such cases. In January 2019, a federal judge authorized ICE to force-feed migrants locked up in El Paso who were refusing to eat; staff pushed plastic tubing up their noses and pipped food directly into their stomachs. Since the COVID-19 pandemic arrived, detained migrants across the county—from Massachusetts and California to Texas—have been pepper sprayed after raising concerns about the conditions of their confinement.

They have reason for concern. The coronavirus is highly contagious and can tear through tightly-packed facilities like prisons, halfway houses and nursing homes.

An outbreak at the Otero County Prison Facility, run by a different private prison company in the southeastern corner of New Mexico, has so far infected more than 700 inmates and killed four. At a press conference on June 24, state officials acknowledged that it’s impossible to prevent the disease from spreading in such close quarters.

In the Torrance County facility, at least 32 detainees have already contracted COVID-19, according to the New Mexico Department of Health. ICE reports 42 total confirmed cases; the state didn’t respond to a question about the disparity.

Sprays like pepper spray are especially dangerous during a respiratory pandemic, according to medical experts. The chemicals induce coughing, increase a person’s chances of catching COVID-19 and worsen symptoms among those already infected.

In fact, it was fear of the impending disease that hardened the migrants’ resolve. Soon after the hunger strike began, the first case of COVID-19 was detected inside the facility, and the men demanded answers: Could they be released into the community while the government figured out what to do with them? What was the status of their legal cases? Would new migrants be admitted into the facility, adding to already crowded conditions?

Bacallao had hoped the facility staff might answer these questions. Instead, on May 14, a high-ranking prison official came into the dorm to deliver a warning. “It was going to get ugly” unless the hunger strike ceased, Bacallao recalled him saying.

The migrants were offered the chance to leave the room and two of them took it; according to one detainee, Bacallao remained:

“When we were handcuffed with plastic and brought out of the dormitory, their bodies stinging from the spray. Some were carried out on stretchers or wheelchairs, a migrant said. One man had suffered a head wound.

Bacallao was briefly checked by a nurse before being placed in a holding cell with one other migrant. The two could barely see—pepper spray can cause temporary blindness—but they managed to navigate their way to a sink in the cell where they tried to wash themselves off.

The water only made it worse. Bacallao stood still for an hour with his arms outstretched; it was too painful to let anything touch his skin.

Though several migrants told Searchlight that they had been injured, Gustin said that medical staff “reviewed” everyone “involved in the protest” and that “no injuries occurred.”

**IRRITANTS LIKE PEPPER SPRAY ARE ESPECIALLY DANGEROUS DURING A RESPIRATORY PANDEMIC, ACCORDING TO MEDICAL EXPERTS. ICE POLICY ALLOWS THE USE OF PEPPER SPRAY TO “GAIN CONTROL” OF A DETAINEE.**
GALLUP — In late April, a COVID-19 patient died following what several staff physicians described as gross mismanagement by health care workers at Rehoboth McKinley Christian Hospital. Another patient suffered severe brain damage when a ventilator was improperly adjusted, according to those same physicians. And the hospital’s critical care doctor, the only critical care physician in McKinley County, resigned, citing patient safety concerns.

On May 5, an ad hoc group of staff providers at the hospital unanimously voted to submit a declaration of no confidence in Rehoboth CEO David Conejo. The group, which formed this spring to protest conditions, followed up with a warning letter to the hospital’s board of directors.

The letter charged Conejo with creating an unsafe working environment, failing to effectively communicate, promoting a lack of transparency and poor fiscal management.

“The board members should understand that they are ultimately responsible for breaches in their fiduciary obligations to the hospital system by allowing the CEO to create unsafe working conditions,” the health care workers wrote.

They accused the leadership at Gallup’s second largest hospital of questionable decision-making that led to severe staff shortages, a Searchlight New Mexico investigation found. Interviews with six doctors, three nurses and other caregivers, and a review of internal emails and written complaints, reveal a hospital in disarray.

Three physicians contacted by Searchlight agreed to go on the record together. They are Chris Hoover, a urologist now directing the allocation of ventilators; Neil Jackson, a family medicine doctor now working in intensive care; and Andrea Walker, chief of obstetrics and gynecology.

“Our hospital has not been safe in recent weeks,” they said in a collective statement. “And to not be transparent about this is medically unethical. We’re working incredibly hard on the front lines but due to management’s poor choices, we’re left without the tools we need to fulfill our obligations to the community.”

AS COVID-19 SURGES, THE HOSPITAL FALTERS

Critically understaffed for weeks — while treating between 15 and 20 patients sick with COVID-19 — the private nonprofit hospital is faltering just as Gallup weathers a surge in coronavirus cases.

A 60-bed hospital with an eight-bed intensive care unit, Rehoboth has been operating far below minimum standards on nurse-patient ratios, Searchlight found. National nursing guidelines recommend that hospitals maintain one nurse to every three patients in most settings, with acute-care units requiring a one-to-one or one-to-two ratio.

In recent weeks, Rehoboth assigned one nurse to every two or three critical care patients and one nurse to up to seven patients in other units, said Val Wangler, the hospital’s chief medical officer. One nurse, who asked for anonymity, told Searchlight that she was alone during one shift in late April — the only nurse on a unit with nine patients.

Others had similar concerns. A labor and delivery nurse, assigned to an ICU filled with six patients, “plus new ad-
Many of the nurses and doctors on duty were unprepared to care for patients suffering from acute respiratory distress, according to several staff physicians. They blamed system inefficiencies, outdated equipment, a poorly trained support staff, and an administration that negligently failed to recognize and address the severity of the problems.

"I can say that I have never before in my career walked past a call light or intentionally ignored call lights in order to get through my day," wrote the nurse, who asked to remain anonymous. "I am seeing images of helpless, desperate elderly patients tangled up in their beds and looking at me begging for help … I have this feeling that I will enter a room and find a patient dead." Conejo did not respond to requests for comment. Referring to his own role, Rehoboth’s public information officer wrote: "COVID-19 is a new challenge for everyone. We are learning every day and our staff is working very hard to provide the best care possible for our COVID-19 patients."

NAVAJO NATION UNDER SIEGE

Located at the edge of the Navajo Nation — where the coronavirus infection rate is one of the highest in the nation — Gallup has become an epicenter for the scourge. The city serves as a major shopping and medical hub for Navajo, Zuni and surrounding tribal communities, increasing the potential for widespread transmission. As of May 6, the Navajo Nation reported 2,654 confirmed coronavirus cases and 85 deaths.

On May 1, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham issued an executive order that closed all roads into Gallup, declaring a state of emergency.

The city’s two hospitals, Rehoboth McKinley and Gallup Indian Medical Center, sit directly across the street from one another on Hospital Drive. The latter, a federal facility run by the Indian Health Service, serves enrolled members of federally recognized tribes, leaving Rehoboth as the only hospital within 100 miles that is open to the general public.

Private rural hospitals everywhere are struggling to maintain staff while losing revenue. Rehoboth is one of many such hospitals that rely on elective surgery to stay financially afloat.

In Gallup, that all came to a stop on March 25, when the governor temporarily ordered a halt to all elective surgery in New Mexico.

That same week, the hospital terminated the contracts of 17 nurses, most of them working in the emergency room and operating room. On April 1, four hospital physicians delivered a letter to the administration, demanding to know what steps it would take to maintain patient care standards and safe staffing levels.

FINANCIAL DECISIONS

Conejo responded with his own series of memos and emails, arguing that because the hospital could no longer depend on elective surgery, the cuts had become financially necessary.

“We are making difficult decisions, which will secure both our short- and long-term futures,” Conejo wrote in an email to staff on April 6. “Yes, we have reduced a number of contract nurses and we have asked some physicians and their teams to accept adjustments, due to the state’s mandate to stop all non-essential surgical procedures.”

During one communication with staff, Conejo emailed a budget document that listed his annual salary of $674,481. In an accompanying document he wrote that he “plans to give at least $50k in this current effort” and that he “generously gives of personal time and money to feed and clothe the poor.”

Nine days later, on April 15, Conejo again emailed staff, this time to say that the hospital had received nearly $3 million in federal aid and expected to receive at least another $11 million in federal loans.

He did not mention any plans to use those funds to address staffing shortages. By then, Rehoboth had lost even more workers — 30 employees had tested positive for COVID-19, including 10 nurses.

The medical staff was outraged by what they called a lack of foresight by the CEO. “At that point, management left us dangerously short-staffed and expected our nurses and medical assistants to work harder and for longer in areas outside of their expertise,” said Hoover, Jackson and Walker in their statement to Searchlight. “There were errors happening that should never occur in any medical setting.”

“LIFE-ALTERING ERRORS”

According to two physicians who spoke to Searchlight, a COVID-positive patient spent the night of April 26 on a maladjusted ventilator. The equipment, which pushes oxygen to the lungs, had slipped out of the trachea and was resting in the patient’s mouth, rendering it useless for hours. The patient died in the following days. Another patient suffered brain damage following similar ventilator mismanagement.

“I can say that I have never before in my career walked past a call light or intentionally ignored call lights in order to get through my day,” wrote the nurse, who asked to remain anonymous. "I am seeing images of helpless, desperate elderly patients tangled up in their beds and looking at me begging for help … I have this feeling that I will enter a room and find a patient dead.” Conejo did not respond to requests for comment. Referring to his own role, Rehoboth’s public information officer wrote: "COVID-19 is a new challenge for everyone. We are learning every day and our staff is working very hard to provide the best care possible for our COVID-19 patients."

Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, the New Mexico Department of Health, State Sen. George Muñoz (D-Gallup), and the greater Gallup community demanded change as a result of this story. A month following publication, the hospital’s CEO, David Conejo, was fired.
Elders are the pillars of the family, especially grandmothers. They are the keepers of our stories, history, traditions and culture. They connect us to our ancestors. They take care of us, and in exchange, we’re taught to look after them.

Since the pandemic hit, memories and thoughts of my grandmother are ever present. The coronavirus, as of August 4, has infected 9,139 people on the Navajo Nation and killed 462, many of them elderly.

What would it be like if my grandmother were here during COVID? I wondered. Could I keep myself from visiting for months? What would my family do to keep her safe?

When you grow up Navajo, at least for me, you are taught that elders are the pillars of the family, especially grandmothers. They are the keepers of our stories, history, traditions and culture. They connect us to our ancestors. They take care of us, and in exchange, we’re taught to look after them.

Are elders around the reservation getting the attention they need during the pandemic? And, most importantly, do they have enough water and food? I decided to find out.

The Navajo Nation, it is widely known, has some of the highest rates of hunger in the country; with a pandemic at hand, action is clearly needed.
Few complained. It was as if they had accepted this way of life — living in desperate conditions, largely ignored by their community and political leaders. They were used to not being taken care of.

Tears began to flood my eyes behind the surgical mask and Navajo scarf I wore. My voice turned shaky as I complimented her efforts to look after her granddaughter and thanked her in Navajo for sharing her story. I’ve been a journalist for almost 20 years, and it was the first time I cried on assignment.

I visited three other elders that week. Edison Johnson, a man in his 60s, lives in a dirt-floored shack with no running water, toilet, sink, kitchen or electricity. He stores food in plastic coolers; he has no access to ice, so he keeps nothing cool.

When he needs electricity, he runs a series of extension cords from his son’s house to his own, at the top of a hill. “I wish I had an oven so I can make biscuits,” he said.

Elizabeth Woody, 70, gets her water from a faucet outside her house. She has no indoor toilet. If she needs to bathe, she explained, she fills a bucket with water and gives herself a sponge bath.

Few complained. It was as if they had accepted this way of life — living in desperate conditions, largely ignored by their community and political leaders. They were used to not being taken care of.

And those in the community who advocated for them faced retribution, I was told. If people talked to the media, they feared they would lose their jobs.

DESPERATE CONDITIONS

The Navajo Nation, it is widely known, has some of the highest rates of hunger in the country, with a pandemic at hand, action was clearly needed. Numerous nonprofits — some from as far away as California — donated boxes of food. Throughout the past four months, Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez handed out free food at most of the 110 chapters around the reservation.

But none of the elders I spoke to had received a food donation. They lived too far away. They had no one to pick up the boxes for them.

“All in all, no one is caring for anyone. They’re just thinking about themselves,” a community worker told me.

Who was responsible? Chapter officials, neglectful family members, the community and — most of all — the Navajo Nation leaders, sources said.

And so I called the leaders. The only person to respond was Navajo Nation Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty, who represents seven chapters in the Northern Agency. Crotty, who’s known as an advocate for senior citizens, said she always has elders in mind, especially when looking at legislation.

Some elderly people do fall through the cracks, she said. She was working on a long-term solution — a case management system that would closely track elders’ needs. But to the best of her knowledge, food and other resources had been available to the elderly, even in remote areas.

I continued with my reporting, only to hear from one of my sources calling to say she no longer wanted to be named in the story. Her supervisor had spoken to her and she and other employees were told to refrain from talking about the food shortages, especially to the media. “We could lose our jobs,” the source said. Within the day, two community workers I’d interviewed also backed out of the story.

My calls to local chapter officials also went unanswered. Attempts to reach Nez failed.

Throughout my time as a Navajo journalist, I’ve heard many stories of Navajo officials who stonewalled reporters or intimidated people who spoke out. Navajo Nation leaders often refused to answer questions from Navajo reporters and local media (although they showed little reluctance when it came to giving quotes to national media like CNN and the New York Times).

But to be shut out for a story about elders? That was something I never expected. I especially didn’t expect it during a pandemic, when protecting elders lies at the heart of a public health campaign to slow the surge of COVID-19.

I didn’t expect it amid the constant messages to take care of our elders, which appear in Navajo Nation virtual town hall meetings, on Twitter, Facebook and television.

The reservation is my home. I have a deep connection and admiration for where my roots are planted. But it’s hard to ignore the darkness that coincides.

Now, when I listen to KTNN, I think of the elders I met, and wonder if they’re listening, too. Five weekends have passed since I bid the grandmother and girl farewell. And every weekend since, I’ve wondered whether they have enough to eat and whether anyone’s checked in on them. I’ve wondered if anyone else is wondering about them.
A Massive Hemp Empire is Accused of Growing Illegal Marijuana and Sowing Violence
SHIPROCK — In the fertile northeast corner of the Navajo Nation, fields that only months ago were traditional open-air corn farms are now stuffed with hundreds of industrial-sized greenhouses, each glowing with artificial lights and brimming with emerald cannabis plants. Security cameras ring the perimeters and hired guards in flak jackets patrol the public roads alongside the farms.

Every weekday throughout the summer, a group of local kids woke at sunrise and arrived at the farm by 7:30, ready for a 10-hour shift of hard labor under the high desert sun. Many were teenagers, 13- and 14-year-olds lured by offers of quick cash. A few were as young as 10.

Joining them were scores of foreign workers — an estimated 1,000 people, many of them Chinese immigrants brought to New Mexico from Los Angeles, according to Navajo Nation Police Chief Phillip Francisco.

Seven-foot-tall black fencing shields the activities inside these greenhouses, but farm workers, neighbors and law enforcement officers have provided an inside view.

Chinese managers oversee the day-to-day logistics, they say, bringing in diesel generators on freight trucks to power the greenhouses, installing dozens of cheaply built trailers to house the immigrant workers and drilling unpermitted wells to irrigate thousands of thirsty cannabis plants.

Some of the Chinese carry guns,” said Darren Gipson, 19, one of seven farm workers interviewed by Searchlight New Mexico. “One time a couple of them got into a knife fight. We just basically do what they tell us and keep to ourselves.”

The crops, according to Benally, are merely hemp plants — a type of cannabis that is grown for its fiber and processed into over-the-counter health products. Hemp, a common agricultural crop, looks and smells identical to regular marijuana but contains only trace amounts of psychoactive THC.

But according to the seven employees interviewed by Searchlight, the farms are not only growing hemp. They’re also producing high-powered, black-market marijuana.

Irving Lin, a Los Angeles-based real estate agent who is one of Benally’s primary business associates, acknowledged that this was true.

“A few places” are growing marijuana, Lin told Searchlight, adding that most of the crops are hemp. “Some people … might want to give it to their friend or something, or maybe they can sell it for a higher price,” he explained about the marijuana.

In little more than a year, Benally and his associates have built an audacious empire of unlawful farms in one of the most remote landscapes in the state — a place where law enforcement struggles to fight routine crimes, let alone investigate what appears to be a sophisticated international cannabis network.

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency told Searchlight that Chinese-run marijuana operations are popping up in rural and urban areas around the West — some located just a short drive from the Navajo Nation.

In August 2018, agents from the DEA, the U.S. Attorney’s Office and local law enforcement raided a large black-market marijuana growing operation in Cortez, Colorado, 40 miles north of Shiprock. The raid was part of a federal investigation into a California-linked Chinese drug trafficking network in Colorado. It culminated in May 2019 with the seizure of more than 80,000 marijuana plants — the biggest black-market marijuana bust in state history, the U.S. Attorney’s Office said.

“There are literally thousands of Chinese-operated [illegal marijuana] grow sites throughout Colorado,” said Wendi Roewer, field intelligence manager for the DEA’s Denver Field division. Many of them masquerade as hemp farms, she added. “Would they move beyond the borders of Colorado if they felt safe doing so? Yeah, it seems possible.”

GOVERNMENT AGENCIES LAUNCH INVESTIGATION

So alarming are the operations in Shiprock that the FBI,
with a loaded shotgun and a Glock 9mm at the ready. "We won’t back down. This is our home, and we’re going to fight to defend our farms as a threat to that tradition."

Joe Ben, a prominent corn farmer and outspoken opponent of the cannabis farms, prepared for a showdown in Shiprock, where the man had died, prepared for a shootout. Police and San Juan County Sheriff’s Office have joined the Department of Homeland Security, Navajo Nation, a fertile sliver of lush farmland along the San Juan River, to combat the threat. In 2019, Benally partnered with a Las Vegas-based financier named DaMu Lin, CEO of One World Ventures Inc., a publicly traded company that says it invests in cannabis projects on Native American land. DaMu Lin (no relation to Irving), who describes himself on Facebook as an “International Man of Business,” appointed Benally to the One World Ventures board of directors in March 2019, according to a company press release. The Shiprock operation also obtained funding from SPI Energy Co., a publicly traded company based in China.

“Mr. Benally brought these workers here under false pretenses,” Francisco said. “They transplant their lives here thinking they were going to be working on a legitimate project, only to find out that it’s all illegal. They’re really victims too.”

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“The tribe has been failing us. These farms belong to the people, and so the people control what they want to grow,” Benally told Searchlight in an interview in August. “Yeah, right,” one worker, Van Yazzie, laughed when told about Benally’s explanation. “All I know is, you smoke it, it gets you high.”

Reaching into his backpack, he pulled out three containers of purple and lime-green buds that he said were given to him by a farm supervisor — a common incentive offered to the Navajo workers, according to multiple employees. He reached out his hand. “Here, why don’t you go see for yourself?”

Although the origin of those samples could not be confirmed, Searchlight took them to a state-certified laboratory for analysis. Each contained between 20 percent and 27 percent THC — a higher concentration than the THC content of many marijuana strains sold in recreational dispensaries.

“Tha’s a very good plant,” Lin said, adding that he did not know any specifics of the strains tested by Searchlight. Describing the plants on the farms, he said, “I think about 80 [of] 90 percent is 14.15 percent [THC]. But some could be higher.”

DANGEROUS JOBS

Most mornings this summer, the Navajo kids said they spent an hour or so cleaning up the trash from the raucous parties that were an almost nightly occurrence on the farms, then awaited orders from their shift bosses. The work was grueling — employees hauled 60-pound bags of soil throughout the labyrinthine networks of greenhouses, handled dangerous chemicals and operated heavy machinery. The hourly cash pay was $5. At least two kids on the work crews were 10 years old, employees said.

“They always give the Navajos the dangerous jobs,” said Gibson, the 19-year-old employee, recalling an instance in which he and his uncle fumbled an unlabeled container of acid they were told to carry, splashing some of it on their hands and on the ground, where it frothed “like the blood from Alien vs. Predator.”

On good days, their supervisors assigned them to the “dark room,” where they trimmed buds with the sharp blades of a whirring, mechanized metal fan, getting piles of dope ready to load onto the moving trucks that arrived weekly.

“Thar’s Blue Cookie, Northern Lights, Skywalker OG, Blueberry Kush, Sour Diesel, Jet Fuel,” said Amber Brown, 20, ticking off the marijuana strains she and other workers said were written on plastic labels tucked into the pots.

“This is about sovereignty,” Benally told Searchlight in an interview in August. A marijuana enthusiast who has dubbed himself the “Father of Native American Hemp,” Benally has frequently advocated for more tribal investment in cannabis. In 2017, he tried and failed to get medical marijuana cultivation legalized by the tribal legislature. He ran for tribal president in 2018 and in the 2020 Democratic primary for U.S. Congress; he lost both times.

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PARKING LOT PAYDAY

On August 6, Dineh Benally parked his white Cadillac Escalade in front of the City Market grocery store, the busiest parking lot in the town of Shiprock, where a reporter watched as he reached his arm out of the dark tinted windows and palm-sized fists of rolls of cash to cannabis farm workers. It was a cavalier way of doing business, given the growing tensions between anti-hemp Shiprock residents and Benally’s supporters and crew. The week before, at least 100 community members and activists from the American Indian Movement had converged in protest, shouting through megaphones for Benally to resign from the farm board. Several traditional corn farmers, some claiming the cannabis farms had disrupted their irrigation lines and stolen their water, carried guns

Other community members have described seeing Asian farm workers apparently trying to flee the farms, sometimes standing on the dusty reservation roads with suitcases to catch a ride out of town; sometimes waiting outside of gas stations asking for help getting home. One resident, Marlene Frank, recounted how back in June, a Vietnamese woman had appeared at her family home in a remote part of Shiprock — lost, disoriented, begging for water and asking for help to get back to Saigon. Such scenarios raise “clear red flags for labor trafficking and severe exploitation,” said Stephanie Richard, senior policy advisor at the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Human Trafficking, a Los Angeles-based human rights group. “Authorities would be remiss not to investigate it as such,” she added.

Law enforcement has in fact voiced concerns about possible human trafficking on the cannabis farms. In July, San Juan County Sheriff Shane Ferrari was so suspicious that he requested an investigation by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. An agent from ICE reviewed the trafficking status of a group of farm workers and did not investigate further, Ferrari said, leaving the trafficking question unresolved.

Neighbors describe seeing the Asian workers sleeping in fields and ditches, shivering through the night and unsure of where to go. “Mr. Benally brought these workers here under false pretenses,” Francisco said. “They transplant their lives here thinking they were going to be working on a legitimate project, only to find out that it’s all illegal. They’re really victims too.”

IMPACT:

This story led to the dismantlement of dozens of cannabis farms on the Navajo Nation.
arrests, issued nearly 300 citations and seized what Chief Phillip Francisco described as “thousands of pounds of marijuana” — a quantity so great that the police department soon ran out of storage space in its evidence lockers.

A Navajo court issued a temporary restraining order to close the farms, and the tribal government filed a lawsuit against 33 Navajo farmers who leased their land to cannabis growers.

Still, five farms remain in operation, Francisco said, and a steady stream of workers continues to process the plants.

One of those workers was Qinliang Wang, who arrived in New Mexico eager to begin a job “trimming flowers.” Wang was among those arrested at the Travel Inn in October.
“It’s really heartbreaking. These workers aren’t drug dealers. I truly think that they’ve been duped. But the people that are responsible for it — I want to make sure these sons of bitches are the ones that go down.”
— SHERIFF SHANE FERRARI

“I lost my job in California because of the pandemic back in March,” he told a reporter, speaking in Mandarin, two days before his arrest. “My ancestors have been farmers for generations. When a friend told me about this work opportunity, I thought it would be perfect. Nobody told me it was illegal. Nobody told me it was illegal.”

Wang, a former restaurant worker in California, moved to the U.S. from China’s Hubei Province in 2014. Like many of the Chinese laborers who came to New Mexico this year, he learned about the work opportunity through a friend. Other workers were recruited through “job agencies” in East Los Angeles and Queens, New York. Labor advocates say that these agencies are common in Chinese immigrant communities and often serve to entrap workers in exploitative jobs.

Wang and 16 coworkers were booked into the San Juan County Adult Detention Center and have since been released. They face multiple felony drug trafficking and conspiracy charges, carrying the possibility of more than a decade in prison, according to the New Mexico Public Defender’s Office.

Documents and contracts obtained by Searchlight show that the project’s organizers deceptively presented the farms as legal ventures, enticing low-income residents of predominantly Chinese immigrant neighborhoods in Southern California to join up as laborers or investors. Some of the investors said that they mortgaged their homes, cashed in their retirement accounts or borrowed from loan sharks on the promise of high returns.

One investor, who identified himself only as “Mr. Zhang,” said he poured $220,000 into a small plot of cannabis farmland in Shiprock, compromising his life savings and listing his house in Los Angeles as collateral on high-interest loans.

“We are not rich people,” Zhang said in Mandarin, speaking from the trailer he shared with six other farm workers. He left his wife and two young children back in California, with the promise that he would return with money for the family. Now, with their savings gone up in smoke, his wife has left him.

“I am homeless now,” he said. “I haven’t had a bath for eight days. How can I live this way? I don’t have face to meet my friends and relatives. I would kill myself if I only knew how.”

AGENTS SUSPECT HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Federal investigators have descended on the Navajo Nation in response to a September 23 Searchlight story detailing illegal marijuana cultivation, child labor and worker exploitation. Agents from the U.S. State Department’s human trafficking unit are investigating the farms at the request of U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich.

Most of the workers have since returned to California and New York, according to interviews with at least 10 Chinese farm laborers and investors. But hundreds still remain.

Some are stranded in the high desert of New Mexico, left to fend for themselves after their supervisors fled without paying them their wages; others spend their days crowded into a trailer park on the outskirts of Farmington, clinging to the hope that they might still recoup a part of their investment. Still others are hiding out inside the reservation, sleeping in the woods that line the San Juan River, according to local residents.

“It’s really heartbreaking,” said Sheriff Ferrari. “These workers aren’t drug dealers. I truly think that they’ve been duped. But the people that are responsible for it — I want to make sure these sons of bitches are the ones that go down.”

All the operation’s organizers remain at large — including Dineh Benally, the local Navajo farm board president and principal organizer, who fled the area and is presumed to be in hiding, according to Navajo Nation Police Chief Francisco.

“The Chinese investors have lost millions or even hundreds of millions of dollars,” said Mike Chen, another worker, who was himself not arrested. “Dineh Benally is a liar and a fraud.”

Benally’s attorney, David Jordan, did not respond to requests for comment.

Meanwhile, a handful of the farms continues to operate. Video obtained by Searchlight shows hydroponic irrigation equipment nourishing lush cannabis plants, and neighbors report that most nights, under the cover of darkness, Chinese workers slip onto the farms and harvest the crops by flashlight.

Navajo Police set up a hotline for residents to report violations of the restraining order. But without jurisdiction to arrest non-Natives, tribal police have been unable to fully prevent the Chinese workers from continuing to grow and harvest marijuana inside the enormous greenhouses.

Angered by what they perceive as an inadequate response by tribal law enforcement, neighbors and traditional corn farmers have begun patrolling the neighborhoods where the cannabis farms remain active, staking out farms throughout the night and reporting their sightings to tribal police.

“Even as we talk right now, they are still harvesting,” said Zachariah Ben, a corn farmer who on a recent night joined a group of Shiprock residents — some carrying baseball bats, tasers and other weapons — outside a farm where they saw workers harvesting marijuana.

When the group called Navajo Police, an officer instructed the irate crowd to leave.

“It is such a disappointment,” Ben said, explaining that traditional farmers see the massive greenhouses as a threat to Navajo sovereignty and culture. “We are the laughingstock of other tribes because we can’t stop this from happening.”

IMPACT:

A major investigation involving 21 state, federal and tribal agencies was opened as a direct result of this story. The investigation is exploring allegations of child labor, human trafficking and interstate drug trafficking.
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.

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