FROM THE EDITOR

I AM A COMPULSIVE LIST MAKER. I’ve got my daily to-do list, my weekly grocery list, and my ever-ending list for Searchlight story ideas. My phone is full of outdated lists and my journals testify to every good intention I’ve ever set out for myself. I pore over end-of-year lists the way some people pore over cookbooks. Best books of the year, best movies, best music videos, best restaurants. These lists are, for me, one of the ritual pleasures of December.

So you can imagine the delight I take in compiling this magazine (our sixth, to date) at the end of every year. From the first, the rationale behind this effort has been to cull the best of our work — to cover the massive expansion of nuclear weapons production at Los Alamos National Laboratory. The estimated $50 billion project involving controversial “plutonium pits” is already well over budget and yet — I kid you not — few people outside New Mexico know anything about it. But it’s a subject that can’t be ignored. The lab has already hired hundreds of workers and is on course to hire thousands more, including scientists and others from across the country. This infusion is certain to ratchet up the housing crisis in Northern New Mexico and affect infrastructure, roads and rails. Southern New Mexico is also facing major challenges, amid plans to ship radioactive waste from across the country for burial at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant outside Carlsbad.

It’s not an exaggeration to say that Searchlight’s coverage of this subject is unique. Thanks to our nuclear reporter, Alicia Inez Guzmán, our stories are simultaneously national in scope and intensely local in perspective. Alicia brings an unusual vantage point to this subject. As a native of the northern New Mexico pueblo of Truchas, her family members have worked at the lab and she herself spent a summer there as an intern. She has also studied the history of place, identity and land use in New Mexico, and has a doctorate in visual and cultural studies.

Of course, the problem with lists is that you always have to leave something behind. In this case, the omissions include several heartbreaking stories and powerful photographs, there simply wasn’t space in this one slim volume. So I urge you to please go to our website and feast your eyes on Nadav Soroker’s 270-mile photo expedition along the Rio Grande. Take a deep breath and read Ed’s piece revealing how our state consigns some of its most troubled foster children to homeless shelters. Read and sit with a most eloquent essay by Deborah Jackson Taffa as she explores persistent questions of race and class in New Mexico.

This year was also a turning point for Searchlight. We introduced an entire new beat — to cover the massive expansion of nuclear weapons production at Los Alamos National Laboratory. The estimated $50 billion project involving controversial “plutonium pits” is already well over budget and yet — I kid you not — few people outside New Mexico know anything about it. But it’s a subject that can’t be ignored. The lab has already hired hundreds of workers and is on course to hire thousands more, including scientists and others from across the country. This infusion is certain to ratchet up the housing crisis in Northern New Mexico and affect infrastructure, roads and rails. Southern New Mexico is also facing major challenges, amid plans to ship radioactive waste from across the country for burial at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant outside Carlsbad.

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When Searchlight launched six years ago, it was a shot in the dark. At the time, we had no idea that we would grow into an impactful news organization — or that we would even be here today. We have so many people to thank for that — not least our board, which has never asked us to refrain from publishing a sensitive story or shy away from a sacred cow. And you, dear reader, are most important of all.
CONTRIBUTORS

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

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

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

Raised in the northern New Mexican village of Truchas, ALICIA INEZ GUZMÁN has written about the history of place, identity, and land use in New Mexico. She brings this background to her role as nuclear and atomic affairs reporter at Searchlight, where she focuses on the massive expansion of plutonium pit and weapons production at Los Alamos National Lab. In 2021, she won the Sigma Delta Chi Award from the Society of Professional Journalists. The former senior editor of New Mexico Magazine, Alicia holds a Ph.D. in visual and cultural studies from the University of Rochester in New York.

ELISE KAPLAN graduated from the University of New Mexico with a degree in journalism in 2012. Before joining Searchlight as the education reporter, she spent almost nine years focusing on accountability while covering crime, the criminal justice system and more for the Albuquerque Journal. She has won multiple regional awards for her reporting on subjects including the ongoing crisis at the state’s largest jail and the pandemic on Native lands.

ED WILLIAMS has reported on child welfare and foster care since coming to Searchlight. In 2019, he won the News Leader Association’s Frank A. Blethen Award for local accountability for his stories about abuses in the foster care system. He won the national organization’s First Amendment Award in 2022 and was an NLA award finalist in 2020 for a story about the abusive discipline of students with disabilities. In 2022, he worked in partnership with ProPublica to produce a yearlong investigation on foster care in New Mexico.

As an intern and Bradlee Fellow at The Washington Post, VANESSA G. SÁNCHEZ covered education, local government and politics in the Baltimore-Washington region. She spent the past year at Searchlight as a Roy W. Howard Fellow, covering health policies affecting children and families in New Mexico. She holds a master’s degree in journalism from the University of Maryland.

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

Above: Ed Williams (right), talking to New Mexico Attorney General Raúl Torrez. Photo by Nadav Soroker
and Ohkay Owingeh elder Herman Agoyo put it, “with no the secret city, “a place,” as the late anti-nuclear activist the vast darkness at the twinkling lights of Los Alamos, and supporting personnel,” a 1950 internal report read. For the several hundred workers required to man these plants, there must also be several thousand service and supporting personnel:” a 1950 internal report read. Its writer was debating whether Los Alamos was the best place for the weapons lab moving forward.

Scientists performed clandestine work here, yes, but that work required and continues to require the effort of so many others — “supporting personnel!” — who can also be on the frontlines of exposure. I am reminded, for instance, of an experiment that went horribly wrong just nine months after American forces decimated Hiroshima and Nagasaki with nuclear bombs. A Canadian physicist, Louis Slotin, was trying to gather data on nuclear chain reactions when the screw-driver he was holding as a wedge between a beryllium tamper and a plutonium core accidentally slipped. For a brief second, the beryllium and plutonium reached fission, sending out a blast of blue light and radioactivity. Slotin’s death in 1946 has been famously recorded in histories of the Lab. But there were several other people in the room that day, including several colleagues and a security guard whose fate has largely been eclipsed. All that was noted in records of the event was his fear. Apparently, it was said, the security guard ran out of the room and up a hill. And that’s where his part in the story ends.

But he was there, a witness — and one, I imagine, who was exposed to the same plutonium that within a matter of nine days killed Slotin. I’ve long wondered: Who was he? What was his story?

When I think of that man, I think of my Grandpa Gil-bert. Many auxiliary staff were local people who got their start “on the hill” as security guards for the Atomic Energy Commission. That was his story — a career begun as a security guard in 1946 and ended some three decades later as a staff member of the Lab and the University of California, which managed it. The position was a distinction that not many Hispanics held at the time. My mom says he felt dignified by his work there — the only means he had to raise five kids after World War II. But there was a trade-off, including discrete trips to the doctor where he was screened for cancer on a more-than-routine basis.

Many family members would follow in his footsteps — my Uncle Jerry among them. Los Alamos was a place abounding in conspiracy theories and Uncle Jerry found himself at the center of one of them. He believed that racism had created a culture of retaliation, so toxic that it led to his being framed for intentionally dosing his su- pervisor with plutonium-238. After my uncle’s death two years ago, the Santa Fe New Mexican published a column narrating the sordid events — his boss ultimately recanted the allegations and my uncle and others won a settlement — but he wasn’t there to see it. I wonder if there is a hill. And that’s where his part in the story ends.

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What was his story?
filing papers and sending emails. I couldn’t even take a bathroom break without a chaperone accompanying me. Nothing of that work rings more clearly than a memory of two scientists stumbling out into the hallway, covered in blood. An experiment had gone awry — nothing radiation related — but it was so shrouded in mystery that parsing what actually happened is like trying to put a puzzle together that’s missing half the pieces. I watched in horror from the doorframe.

After that, I transferred to the Bradbury Science Museum, also in Los Alamos, where I walked by replicas of Little Boy and Fat Man to get to my desk. I spent that summer, among other things, writing exhibition text about the Manhattan Project’s early architects — J. Robert Oppenheimer, Enrico Fermi, Richard Feynman. I wrote not the history of mi gente, but of those agents of immense creation and destruction, those who’d exacted what Myrriah Gómez in her book, “Nuclear Nuevo México,” calls nuclear colonization. The irony.

It was only when I left the state that I had the distance to understand the debt our communities pay for the good jobs. I began to unpack what it means for New Mexico to be what the writer D.H. Lawrence once called the moon of America. This place was distant enough in America’s consciousness to be foreign, exotic even. But as that “tierra incognita,” the unknown and unknowable blankness stretched across mental maps of the Southwest, our world became America’s wasteland. We continue to sit at the periphery of centers of power, even as we have been forced into the epicenter of this nation’s nuclear weapons complex.

Now, as I write about the role of nuclear weapons across New Mexico, the nation and the globe, Toni Morrison’s words come to mind: “The subject of the dream is the dreamer.” Her ideas about literature were deeply influenced by psychoanalysis. Indeed, to her mind, the act of dreaming was not unlike the act of writing. Or, to put it another way, the subject of the writing is the writer.

My family and community’s own tangled history with the Lab sits in my subconscious like an inchoate thought. Only when I hold it up to scrutiny does that thought form into the imperative, allowing me to fully fathom what the Manhattan Project birthed in our backyard. Perhaps this is what Gómez refers to as an “innate knowing,” our local “sixth sense.”

“Radiation Control Technicians are vital to operations at LANL,” the billboard proclaims. “Start your career as an RCT at Northern NM College.”

My worldview will always shape my writing on a topic that hits so close to home. My intent is to highlight the communities most impacted by 80 years of nuclear presence, from the most recent attempts to modernize the nation’s nuclear arsenal to the long, drawn-out ways radiation can transmit from mother to child. Nuclear issues in this state are generational.

“The locals know their local land and water supplies are contaminated from the nuclear material that was either buried in nearby canyons or on riverbanks. They know their presence on the Pajarito Plateau is being erased from national memory. They know they were placed in dangerous jobs because of their identities.”

— MYRRHÁ GÓMEZ, “Nuclear Nuevo México”
RISKS GROW
SERVICES SHRINK,
IN NEW MEXICO:
HEALTH CRISIS
MATERNAL

BY VANESSA G. SÁNCHEZ | PHOTOS BY NADAV SOROKER | APRIL 13, 2023

CLOVIS — Victoria Robledo was two months pregnant last June when the only women's health clinic in this eastern New Mexico town closed its doors.

Hers was a complicated pregnancy that demanded specialized care, and Robledo, 24, soon found herself driving long distances – 100 miles to Lubbock, Texas, for her first ultrasound, 220 miles to Albuquerque for a special test that revealed the umbilical cord was in a knot.

“I never really understood how dire the need is until I experienced it myself,” said Robledo, who divides her time working as a receptionist, a maternal health activist and the mother of a preschooler and a toddler.

Pregnant women all across New Mexico are facing similar dilemmas. In the last decade, six hospitals around the state have closed their maternity wards and at least 1,000 births have been transferred to new hospitals.

The closures have left women without critical maternal care, putting untold numbers of mothers and infants at risk. Between 2015 and 2018, 77 women died during pregnancy or within a year of giving birth. Some of these deaths were directly related to complications from the pregnancy, such as hemorrhages, others were caused by things like mental health or substance use disorder issues that weren’t properly treated during the pregnancy and after.

The New Mexico Maternal Mortality Review Committee concluded that about 80 percent of these deaths were preventable.

In New Mexico in 2019, 132 infants died before reaching their first birthday. Black newborns died at a rate four times higher than white newborns; Native American and Hispanic newborns died at a rate roughly 1.5 times higher.

The racial and income disparities within these statistics are sobering. Over a 10-year period, Black women, who represent only 3 percent of the state population, died at a rate four times higher than all New Mexico women during and after childbirth. In more recent years, women on Medicaid died at a rate five times higher than women on private insurance. Native American women were two times more likely to experience severe health complications or near deaths than white women during birth.

Three hospitals — the University of New Mexico Hospital, Presbyterian Hospital and Lovelace Women’s Hospital are equipped to take the most complex pregnancies, but only UNMH is qualified to take both preterm and critically-ill newborns. All are in Albuquerque, a three-hour drive or more from many corners of the state.

“If the closest labor and delivery hospital is three hours away from you, you are in danger. If the labor and delivery unit that is close to you is dysfunctional and underfunded, you are in trouble,” said Sunshine Muse, executive director of Black Health New Mexico, a statewide organization working to erase health disparities.

A NATIONAL PROBLEM
The U.S. has the highest maternal mortality rate among high-income countries, one that’s three times higher than Canada’s — and more than 20 times higher than Norway’s. The pandemic did not help matters. An estimated 1205 American women died in 2021 of complications arising from pregnancy or childbirth, a 40 percent jump from 2020, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

In New Mexico, pandemic numbers have not been fully analyzed, but health officials acknowledge that the state is following that sobering trend.

“All signs are pointing that way,” said Eirian Coronado, program manager of the state’s Maternal and Child Health Epidemiology Program. “And we’re not very encouraged right now.”

Advocates and experts alike contend that reducing maternal mortality in New Mexico doesn’t get the attention it deserves. They point to a host of contributing factors. Among them: low reimbursement rates for Medicaid in a state where 65 percent of deliveries fall under its coverage; severe provider shortages across almost every medical specialty, resulting in “maternal health deserts”; bureaucratic barriers that make it difficult for midwives and doulas to provide services, and difficulty recruiting obstetricians and gynecologists in the state’s rural areas, where a third of the population lives.

New Mexico has attempted to address the crisis. Last year, it expanded Medicaid for women for up to a year after birth. This year, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham allocated $10 million for a women’s health clinic in Las Cruces.

Nevertheless, its efforts have fallen short. Experts say that the state has not invested enough in programs to reduce disparities in the maternal death rate and does not mandate the kinds of strict standards for hospitals that could improve maternal health outcomes.

New Mexico’s lack of progress was on display last year when the CDC denied funding to help improve the state’s obstetric care. The agency believed that the state lacked the infrastructure and staff necessary to make effective use of the money, according to the New Mexico Perinatal Collaborative (NMPC), a nonprofit contracted by the state to improve maternal health care.

“It’s kind of abysmal in terms of how much funding is going toward maternal health in the state of New Mexico, given the crisis of maternal health and given the dispar-
Research shows that lack of prenatal care and pre-existing conditions leave women vulnerable to pregnancy complications and severe maternal morbidity, including heart attack, sepsis, and complications that increase preterm births, stillbirths, and death.

Geographic disparities have deepened as women increasingly travel hours for something as basic as an ultrasound. With only three hospitals equipped to treat the most complex pregnancies, transportation is one of the biggest barriers affecting women in remote areas.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING

Among the more than 10 organizations and a dozen providers interviewed by Searchlight, there was a consensus that outcomes will not improve until the health care system becomes more attuned to local communities. This is especially true, they said, for communities of color, which are disproportionately affected by the crisis and more likely to experience racial discrimination and poor treatment in the health care system.

“Work with them, reach out to them, engage with them,” said Monica Esparza, executive director of the Black and Indigenous Maternal Health Policy Coalition. “The numbers are worse than they were when they started.”

Burkhardt said pregnant women are frequently transferred to UNM Hospital with untreated health problems. For example, she said, a provider, Robledo said her only option was to hope for the best. Twice she went to the local emergency room, thinking she was in labor. At 40 weeks and a day, her labor was induced and she gave birth without complications. She was struck by how relieved she felt—she was able to be with her partner when the baby was born. She said, “We cannot blame the collaborative’s failure to make an impact on lack of funding. I think that the Perinatal Collaborative’s failure to create the results that New Mexico so desperately needs is because they don’t have the disciplinary or cultural regional diversity that’s needed to do this.”

HOPING FOR THE BEST

At 36 weeks, when prenatal visits typically become more frequent in order to screen for signs of preeclampsia, gestational diabetes and infections, Victoria Robledo found she was losing her access to health care. Without a provider, Robledo said her only option was hope for the best. Twice she went to the local emergency room, thinking she was in labor. At 40 weeks and a day, her labor was induced and she gave birth without complications. She was struck by how adorable her 7-pound 13-ounce healthy baby was. She held him close, and for the first time in months a wave of relief washed over her.

Burkhardt, the NMPC president, told Searchlight that the pandemic has made it challenging to develop improvements. In addition, she said, there has not been enough funding to build the necessary infrastructure—including dedicated data teams, resources for hospitals and more—so that metrics can be analyzed and hospitals get timely recommendations.

It’s hard to compare New Mexico to places like California or Illinois, Burkhardt added. Their initiatives have been underway for years, get lots more funding and have the necessary systems in place.

New Mexico, meanwhile, can’t even get CDC funding. Burkhardt noted, “As evidenced by the CDC funding map, the CDC decided to fund states with robust data infrastructure already in place, while we were requesting funds to build a data and QI [quality improvement] infrastructure to conduct the work,” she wrote in an email.

Burkhardt said the NMPC cannot do its work effectively unless the state makes this initiative, currently voluntary, a mandate and provides more resources to hospitals.

To Muse, this is passing the buck. The NMPC promised to do a job and has failed, she said. “We cannot blame the collaborative’s failure to make an impact on lack of funding. I think that the Perinatal Collaborative’s failure to create the results that New Mexico so desperately needs is because they don’t have the disciplinary or cultural or regional diversity that’s needed to do this.”

DATA BUT LIMITED ANALYSIS

Racial and ethnic disparities are not unique to New Mexico. They have contributed to worsening maternal health outcomes everywhere around the country. But here, the problem is complicated by the fact that the state and its contractor, the NMPC, have failed to analyze data in a timely manner. As a result, there’s limited information about whether current efforts are working.

In 2018, New Mexico joined the Alliance for Innovation on Maternal Health, a nationwide initiative that helps states improve their data analysis, establish metrics to improve obstetric care and build infrastructure to reduce maternal and infant deaths and injuries.

Leading medical organizations have recognized this program—which has been introduced in every U.S. state—as an effective approach to reduce infant mortality and maternal deaths and injuries inside hospitals, where the vast majority of births take place.

Using this program, California within 14 months reduced serious complications from severe bleeding from 27 to 18 percent, a CDC report shows. Northern New England improved care for women with opioid use disorders by 25 percent. Illinois effectively reduced severe pregnancy complications and deaths by 27 percent.

When New Mexico joined the Alliance, it identified three areas for immediate attention: obstetric hemorrhages, hypertension, and care for pregnant and postpartum women with substance use disorders. The state contracted with the NMPC to develop improvements.

Few have occurred. Instead, the rate of women who experienced severe maternal morbidity increased from 76.12 per 10,000 hospital deliveries in 2018 to 97.75 in 2020.

As the state of maternal health worsened, advocates began to demand a reckoning. Last month, New Mexico’s Black and Indigenous Maternal Health Policy Coalition and the Perinatal Equity Coalition called for the resignation of NMPC’s entire board.

“The data indicates that what they [NMPC staffers] have been supposedly working on is not working,” said Muse, a founding member of the Black and Indigenous Maternal Health Policy Coalition. “The numbers are worse than they were when they started.”

One in every three women statewide—and about one of every two Indigenous women—went without prenatal care during their first trimester.
the state’s Legislative Finance Committee, and roughly 5 percent have a serious mental illness like schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. Collin Neztsosie had been diagnosed with both.

Research shows that people with a mental illness are far more likely to be victims of violence rather than its perpetrators. And people with an untreated mental illness are 16 times more likely to be killed by police, according to the Treatment Advocacy Center, a national nonprofit that advocates for laws, policies and high-quality psychiatric care.

New Mexico’s mental health system is widely acknowledged to be fractured, underfunded and skewed toward crisis care rather than proactive, long-term interventions. With few exceptions, families and individuals are left to navigate the complexities on their own. Like the Neztsosies, they are trapped in a seemingly endless cycle that whisk them from one stop-gap measure to the next — from treatment centers to the ER, from the ER to the streets, from the streets back to the ER. Neztsosie managed to avoid it, but for many, the cycle ends in prison. New Mexico invested $930 million to improve behavioral health services around the state in the 2023 fiscal year, one of many funding increases in recent years. Yet many experts and advocates say the money still hasn’t found its way to the communities that need it most.

The state continues to rank at rock-bottom levels for

**THE FATAL SHOOTING OF COLLIN NEZTSOSIE EXPOSES THE TRAGIC CONSEQUENCES WHEN SOMEONE CALLS FOR HELP — AND POLICE ANSWER.**

BY VANESSA G. SÁNCHEZ AND JOSHUA BOWLING | PHOTOS BY NADAV SOROKER | APRIL 27, 2023

**COLLIN NEZTSOSIE** was no stranger to the Albuquerque Police Department. Its officers had transported him to the ER on numerous occasions when he was in the throes of a mental health crisis. He was listed in the department’s database as a person with acute psychiatric needs. In January 2022, APD assigned a specially-trained crisis intervention officer to regularly check in on him.

That same officer had promised Neztsosie that police would be there whenever he heard voices in his head, family members said. “The cops told him if you have any trouble, any issues, you feel suicidal, you want to hurt somebody, you want to hurt yourself, call 911,” his sister, Natasha Neztsosie, recounted.

That promise went up in smoke on March 19, 2022, when the 33-year-old Navajo father of two — in the midst of another mental health crisis — was shot and killed by Albuquerque police. It happened just a few blocks from his sister’s apartment in the city’s Singing Arrow neighborhood.

“They just shot my brother right in the head,” said Natasha, sitting on a couch surrounded by portraits her brother painted for her. “Why didn’t they give him a chance?”

In the last few years, cities across New Mexico and the nation have poured millions of dollars into civilian response teams and “alternative response programs” to combat an escalating mental health crisis. These programs flag frequent 911 callers and send social workers and behavioral health professionals — instead of armed police — to the scenes of emergency calls for mental health crises.

The need is vast. One of every five New Mexican adults struggles with some form of mental disorder, according to

Above: Natasha Neztsosie uses flowers to cover bullet holes on a light pole near where her brother, Collin, was killed. The family held a vigil at the site on March 19, a year after his death. At right, the Neztsosie family in 2003.
The system failed him, and I’m sure it’s doing it to other people.”  — NATASHA NEZTSOSIE

DEADLY GAPS

Those “avenues” typically begin with civilian responders, many of them licensed social workers and behavioral health counselors who rush to the scenes of mental health emergencies. But even this progressive model is hitting a brick wall — once these responders leave the scene of the incident, the person in crisis may have nowhere to turn. The respondents are treating symptoms; there is often no one within reach to treat the underlying condition.

It’s a tragic shortcoming acknowledged by the very leaders of programs like Albuquerque Community Safety (ACS) and the recently launched Project LIGHT in Las Cruces — both of which send behavioral health specialists to emergency calls for people in severe turmoil.

In 2021, about a fifth of the nearly 4,100 calls to the Albuquerque Police Department’s specially trained crisis intervention officers involved a repeat encounter, data show. Nearly 780 people had anywhere from two to 20 behavioral health encounters with APD during that period.

This was a familiar story for the Neztsosie family, who described spending at least seven years and dozens of phone calls looking for a solution for Collin. He was also grappling with alcohol and drug use, a common “dual diagnosis” for people with emotional distress.

Unable to find long-term treatment, Neztsosie often turned to 911 for help. He bounced in and out of treatment centers, from Las Cruces to Santa Fe and Albuquerque. Sometimes he was turned away because facilities didn’t take Medicaid patients; other times, his stays were limited to just a few days, his family said. One time in 2020, Natasha Neztsosie recalled, he went to a treatment center in Albuquerque while sober and was told he could only be admitted if he was intoxicated.

The mental health crisis, here and across the country, is overwhelming emergency rooms, which have become the de facto response to mental health care. In an attempt to address the problem, a crisis trage center with psychiatric and emergency stabilization services is slated to open in Albuquerque next year.

Critics contend, however, that emergency services are only a Band-Aid on a gaping wound. New Mexico, they say, needs effective, high-quality residential treatment, mental health services and behavioral health programs to meet the demand.

The Legislative Finance Committee has summarized the state’s shortcomings in two withering reports that describe a profound lack of treatment options, evidence-based services and early intervention programs across New Mexico.

As many as 314,000 people — more than the entire population of Las Cruces — have a substance use disorder and are not receiving any treatment, the LFC reported. Many are dealing with mental health issues. If they need long-term treatment facilities, they can’t find them.

“We have people calling in crisis saying ‘I need a place for my son to love,’” said Shannon Errickson, a board member of the National Alliance on Mental Illness in Albuquerque and a program coordinator for families of people with mental illness. Those places, she added, are “few and far between.”

Matt Dietzel, APD’s crisis intervention section commander, agreed with her assessment. He cited the case of one woman who called 911 more than 80 times before long-term psychiatric care was finally arranged for her. The facility was out of state.

TEN-YEAR HIGH FOR POLICE SHOOTINGS

Despite multi-million-dollar financial investments in alternative response programs, an increasing number of people with mental illness have lost their lives at the hands of law enforcement.

Albuquerque police shot and killed at least four people last year during mental health crises; there were two such shootings in 2021. Overall, the department in 2022 hit a 10-year high for police shootings, records obtained by Searchlight show.

In last year’s police shootings, APD officers disproportionately shot Native American and Black men, according to the department’s own figures. Officers are often familiar with the victims.

“Whenever the police shoot someone, especially someone in a mental health crisis, they’re usually known to the police,” Dietzel said.

“The system failed him”

On a chilly Sunday morning a year after the death of Collin Neztsosie, more than a dozen family members and community organizers gathered at Tramway Boulevard SE to set up a descano, or resting place, to honor the “kind, loving and funny” father, brother and uncle they’d lost.

“We are really hurting,” said Natasha Neztsosie, standing next to a memorial plaque shaped like an electric guitar, the instrument her brother had played since he was a teenager.

The family wants people to remember Collin as the musician and artist he was. “He had goals and so much potential,” said Tammy Romero, another sister, adding that the family still stays up at night trying to make sense of how and why their brother was killed.

The sisters question why officers didn’t use de-escalation techniques or use binoculars or rifle scopes to see that their brother was not carrying a gun. They trusted the behavioral health system to help their brother, but it didn’t deliver, Romero said.

“The system failed him,” she said. “And I’m sure it’s doing it to other people.”
ON A SWELTERING DAY IN LATE JUNE, a group of teenage boys crowded and jostled one another in a metal shop tucked behind Robert F. Kennedy Charter School in Southwest Albuquerque.

The object of their interest? A table heaped with gun barrels and firearm parts.

Almost exactly five months earlier, two of their classmates — teenage brothers — had been gunned down at a mobile home park a few miles away. It was far from the first tragedy to befall the 23-year-old middle/high school, and on this particular day it lingered in everyone’s minds.

Many of the charter school’s 375 students have a history of trauma and loss, a harsh reality that teachers and administrators are trained to recognize. School Director Robert Baade estimates that about 25 percent of the students have had a death in their family; 30 percent currently have a family member who is incarcerated; 20 percent have a family member who struggles with a substance addiction.

“It’s an at-risk population,” he said. “When somebody dies in their family what do they do? They have a car wash. They make food and take it to the family. They stand out on the corner with a sign to raise money to bury them. These families, these students, have been through this over and over. They know how to do this.”

So when, in the wake of the double homicide, RFK students wanted to release helium balloons into the sky with notes addressed to the brothers, Baade hesitated.

“All of that’s good stuff, but then it kind of fades away,” he said. “I don’t want the pain to drag around. I want the direct action about what we’re doing about it to stick around.”

He contacted Miranda Viscoli, the co-president of New Mexicans to Prevent Gun Violence, and together they hatched a plan. Five boys from the school would begin working with the nonprofit to learn how to craft vases, gardening tools, and more from firearms surrendered at buyback events.

25 percent of the students have had a death in their family; 30 percent currently have a family member who is incarcerated; 20 percent have a family member who struggles with a substance addiction. 

TURNING GUNS INTO PLOWSHARES
Pedro Reyes, an internationally known Mexican artist who recently had an exhibit at SITE Santa Fe, worked with the students, instructing them on how to make a 12-string guitar from gun parts. On their own they figured out how to make a xylophone — the bars crafted from rifle barrels.

Viscoli, meanwhile, had a trauma surgeon and others — including a man who was shot when he was 15 and is now in a wheelchair — come speak to the boys. She leads similar programs for schools throughout New Mexico.

“I don’t know if I’ve ever met a student who doesn’t feel like they’ve been negatively impacted (by gun violence) and we’ve worked with hundreds of students,” Viscoli said. “A lot of stress, a lot of fear, a lot of insecurity.”

The school’s staff has also seen that stress, fear and insecurity among its student body. For some, the experience of violence has made it hard for them to concentrate in class. For others, it has affected their behavior and outlook on life. Others, still, appear desensitized, already having had a drumbeat of trauma throughout their young lives.

Several boys in the forging workshop said they knew the two brothers, aged 14 and 15, who were killed in January.

“Most people have guns on them,” said Nathan Alvarez, 16, as he prepared to forge bolts into spoons. “They start an argument between each other for no reason, they get mad, and get their weapons out.”

He rarely goes to parties, he said, for fear of guns; he prefers to stay home or hang out with his cousins. For Judeah Piro, 16, creating art from firearms feels like a mission.

“There would be times I would be here working and I would knock out like 10 vases if I could,” he said. “It just feels like I have to.”

A MAJOR PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEM

Research shows that proximity to violence can hamper a child’s ability to learn. A 2012 study in the American Journal of Public Health compared test scores of preschool children in Chicago before and after an act of violence in their neighborhoods. It found lower levels of impulse control, poorer attention and “lower pre-academic skills” after violent incidents.

The researchers concluded that the results “highlight the way that a major public health problem, interpersonal violence, can have consequences that spread throughout a community and affect the behavior of children living within the vicinity in which a violent incident occurs.”

Katherine Ortega Courtney, co-director of New Mexico State University’s Anna, Age Eight Institute, which focuses on child well-being, said it is difficult to isolate the effect of violence on academic achievement. But she said it certainly plays a part.

“I firmly, sincerely, believe that trauma is one of the root causes of our poor education outcomes in the state,” Courtney said. “If we do not address that we’re never going to improve our educational outcomes.”

While school shootings grab headlines, researchers say gun violence is actually more likely to reach young people off campus — at parties, during fights ordrug deals, by accident or through suicide.

That was the case in the deaths of the two brothers, who were shot one Friday night in late January. As described by their teachers, the boys were quiet and reserved, eager to learn. The younger one idolized his older brother; the two ate lunch together every day. They even dressed alike.

In a criminal complaint, detectives wrote that the pair were targeted because they were believed to have stolen a gun from another teenager.

A little more than two months after the shootings, two 17-year-old girls and a 16-year-old boy were arrested and charged with two counts of first-degree murder. According to Bernalillo County Sheriff deputies, the three teenagers asked to meet up with the brothers to “get an eighth,” but shot them instead. The older brother died at the scene. The younger was able to call 911 for help and was taken to a hospital where he died three days later.

“But young people who die from guns actually die in a deadly shootout. Fernandez said there were days when it seemed like it couldn’t happen to students who were so quiet, so polite,” she said. “They just couldn’t believe it.”

In the days that followed, classes were frequently disrupted. Students stepped out to collect themselves — some to speak with an on-site, bilingual, five-person behavioral health team.

For some students, seeing reminders of the brothers — a notebook left on the shelf, an empty chair — was painful; for others it was worse to have the reminders removed. Fernandez said there were days when it seemed like the teenagers wanted to vent, so she would step back from the curriculum and follow their lead.

“They might not know how to diagram sentences as well as we had hoped but I hope that on the flip side they learned about how to handle real-life situations,” she said.
IN MORE THAN 350 POLICE SHOOTINGS ACROSS NEW MEXICO IN THE LAST DECADE, ONLY TWO OFFICERS WERE CHARGED WITH A CRIME. WHY?

BY JOSHUA BOWLING | SEPTEMBER 14, 2023

ALBUQUERQUE POLICE KILLED MORE PEOPLE last year than nearly any other police department in the country, perpetuating a reputation for excessive force that even the U.S. Department of Justice hasn’t managed to rectify despite a nearly 10-year effort.

In 2022, the city’s police force logged a record 18 shootings — killing 10. That grim number of fatalities was exceeded by only three U.S. cities — Los Angeles, New York and Houston — all of which dwarf Albuquerque in population.

If recent history is any indication, the officers involved will never be tried for the shootings.

In terms of overall shootings, both fatal and non-fatal, law enforcement officers in Albuquerque and surrounding Bernalillo County shot 131 people between 2013 and 2022 — likely a gross undercount, given that the Bernalillo County District Attorney only began tracking this data in 2017.

That number reflects just a fraction of a much larger trend: An analysis by Searchlight New Mexico has identified 226 additional police shootings across the state within that 10-year time period, according to data from 14 district attorneys’ offices. Taken all together, the statewide figure totals 357 shootings, an estimated 211 of them fatal, according to Mapping Police Violence, a nonprofit that tracks data nationwide.

Out of all those shootings, only one has ever resulted in criminal charges. Keith Sandy and Dominique Perez of the Albuquerque Police Department were charged with second-degree murder for the 2014 killing of James Boyd, a homeless man with schizophrenia who was camping in the Sandia foothills. Although the case ended in a mistrial, it played out against a backdrop of increased scrutiny. Less than a month after Boyd’s killing, the Justice Department released a blistering report that accused APD of engaging in a “pattern” of excessive force.

That report set the stage for a decade of federal monitoring under a consent decree. Nevertheless, Albuquerque police have continued to shoot people in record numbers. Last year’s 18 police shootings represented an 80 percent increase over 2021. As of late July, according to a department report, APD officers have shot at eight people this year, killing four.

FOXES GUARDING THE HENHOUSE, CRITICS SAY

District attorneys rarely, if ever, conduct investigations into these shootings. In Bernalillo County, the DA lets a special prosecutor decide whether to file charges. In others, a “Multi-Agency Task Force” composed of several local law enforcement agencies investigates.

Critics and reform advocates say this approach is tantamount to letting the fox guard the henhouse. The investigations are tainted from the start, they say, leaving the door open for law enforcement officials to protect their own.

“There are some instances, obviously, where force is justified,” said Laura Schauer Ives, an attorney who has represented the families of people killed in several of Albuquerque’s high-profile police shootings. “But a prosecution is dependent upon a quality investigation. To actually investigate and prosecute cases that deserve prosecution, there needs to be an independent agency.”

New Mexico Attorney General Raúl Torrez said he wants the state legislature to fund permanent investigators and prosecutors who can probe police shootings statewide. Torrez, who previously served as the Bernalillo County District Attorney, said the state needs a review process that “eliminates concerns over potential conflicts of interest” while “promoting public confidence in the criminal justice system.”

District attorneys disagree. They contend that the only people who should investigate police shootings are people who understand what it’s like to be a cop.

“I have no problem with the Multi-Agency Task Force. There’s a reason why it’s multi-agency, so that it’s just not APD, for example, investigating APD,” said Sam Bregman, who was appointed in January to be district attorney in Bernalillo County. “Who else is going to do it, right?”

Bregman has worked on nearly every side of the issue. In the past, he was a private attorney who successfully represented the families of police shooting victims in wrongful-death lawsuits. He also represented Keith Sandy, one of the two Albuquerque officers charged with murder in the 2014 James Boyd shooting. In that case, after the mistrial was declared, both Sandy and his partner went free.

A DEADLY U.S. TREND

Albuquerque’s record number of police shootings mirrors a national trend. Last year, police across the U.S. killed nearly 1,200 people, according to Mapping Police Violence. That makes 2022 the deadliest year for police shootings since the Los Angeles nonprofit began tracking the data in 2013.

Authorities say that if investigations ultimately favor police, it’s due to the pervasiveness of gun violence since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Albuquerque recorded 120 homicides last year, a 58 percent increase from 2020, when 76 homicides occurred.

That trend changed Mary Carmack-Altweis’ perspective once she became district attorney for the First Judicial District, which includes Santa Fe, Rio Arriba and Los Alamos counties.

After three years as a public defender in Albuquerque, she had big plans to take on police shootings. “(But) there’s something going on,” she said. “In my district, it’s that everyone has guns and they’re coming at the police with them.”

Since taking office in 2021, Carmack-Altweis said she

Officers are reflected in the door of a police vehicle in March 2022 as they approach Collin Neztsosie, shortly before killing him, in a still frame taken from Albuquerque Police Department body-camera footage. Neztsosie was suffering a mental health crisis. (Photo courtesy of Albuquerque Police Department)
NEARLY 1,200 PEOPLE. LAST YEAR, POLICE ACROSS THE U.S. KILLED SHOOTINGS MIRRORS A NATIONAL TREND: ALBUQUERQUE'S RECORD NUMBER OF POLICE SHOOTINGS.

When the federal government imposed its consent decree on Albuquerque police in 2014, it mandated a series of reforms. A few months ago, the DOJ praised APD for its efforts — equipping every officer with a body-camera and launching a civilian response unit to investigate low-level uses of force — and loosened its grip on the department.

An objective look at the numbers, however, shows that Albuquerque police are firing their weapons more than ever. In the last five and a half years, a single police officer was involved in five fatal shootings. Bryce Willsey, who joined APD in 2015 and currently works in the department’s Criminal Investigations Bureau, has never been charged by the Bernalillo County DA for any of those five fatalities. In each case, a special prosecutor contracted by the DA’s Office concluded that Willsey was “acting in the line of duty” or that there was not enough evidence to successfully try the case.

In many cases, officials say, police have to make a split-second decision when they fear for their life. “Officers don’t usually choose the situations they find themselves in,” said Michael Cox, a special prosecutor for the DA’s Office who reviewed one of Willsey’s shootings.

BE VERY CAREFUL’

In New Mexico’s largest cities, such shootings have increasingly involved acute mental health crises. One of them occurred last April, when Las Cruces Police Officer Jared Cosper responded to a call about an elderly grandmother with dementia.

The report concluded that Sgt. Ryan Alire-Maez and Officer Julian Norris did nothing wrong. “Under the facts and circumstances, all officers acted reasonably in response to an immediate threat to their and their fellow officers’ safety,” it said.

POLICE SHOOTINGS RARELY LEAD TO CHARGES

When the federal government imposed its consent decree on Albuquerque police in 2014, it mandated a series of reforms. A few months ago, the DOJ praised...
THE NORTHEAST CORNER OF THE NAVAJO NATION is still dotted with abandoned greenhouses — the remnants of one of the federal government’s largest marijuana busts, now tattered and sun-worn from years in the elements. The trafficking victims who once toiled in the greenhouses — most of them Chinese laborers — are scattered across the country, their lives in shambles after a massive raid shut down the illegal business in 2020.

But as federal investigations near their third year without any charges filed, Dineh Benally, the Navajo cannabis entrepreneur who orchestrated the operation, appears no closer to facing arrest. Instead, he’s expanding his marijuana business in New Mexico — again with the help of Chinese laborers, the Torrance County Sheriff’s Department said.

Ever since receiving two cultivation permits from the New Mexico Regulation and Licensing Department, in October 2022, Benally has been working to convert an old pumpkin farm south of Estancia into a large marijuana grow site with about 100 greenhouses. Roughly 16 RVs are parked behind a locked metal gate at the property, closely resembling the trailers where Chinese workers in Shiprock slept after their shifts.

On September 20, Searchlight New Mexico contacted the Regulation and Licensing Department to ask about its background-checking process. Why would someone associated with federal investigations into illegal cannabis and human trafficking be granted permits to start another operation? The agency was “not aware of the investigations into [Benally’s] business prior to licensure,” an RLD spokesperson replied.

In the following weeks, the RLD sent compliance officers to visit Benally’s new farm. They found eight alleged violations of the state’s cannabis regulations, according to an October 12 notification letter sent to Benally’s company.

Among the listed violations: His farm “far exceeded” its legal plant count; there was “rubbish found throughout the facility” and “evidence of pests on cannabis plants”; he had “not conducted a single quality assurance test”; he hadn’t developed required policies and procedures for employees; and the facility lacked mandatory security measures. If Benally doesn’t correct the violations, he faces potential fines and the loss of his cannabis license.

Benally’s attorney did not respond to Searchlight’s email and phone requests for comment; efforts to reach Benally were also unsuccessful.

SHIPROCK AND NAVAJO NATION ‘DESERVE JUSTICE’

In the backdrop, the federal investigation into Benally’s black-market operation in Shiprock continues to languish, creating intense frustration for Navajo law enforcement authorities. Because much of the case falls under federal jurisdiction, tribal prosecutors must defer to the U.S. Attorney.

“To date, nobody responsible for the harm caused to the Navajo Nation and to these workers by Benally and his associates’ illegal marijuana operation has been prosecuted,” Navajo Nation Attorney General Ethel Branch wrote in an emailed statement to Searchlight.

The U.S. Attorney for the District of New Mexico, which has jurisdiction over criminal investigations, declined to comment.

For people whose lives were upended by Benally’s gambit, the outrage is palpable. While Benally and his partners pursued their unlawful empire, the Navajo
Navajo Nation — neighbors took to the streets in protest, charging them with multiple felonies. Redfeather-Bennally, a Navajo farm board official and prominent opponent of the Shiprock marijuana venture, tried to personally enrich themselves, she wrote. “Why haven’t they been prosecuting that?” asked Bea Redfeather-Bennally, a Navajo farm board official and prominent opponent of the Shiprock marijuana venture. “That’s the million-dollar question.”

FORCED LABOR ALLEGED

On September 27, 2023, 15 Chinese immigrants filed a civil suit in New Mexico state court, alleging that Benally and his associates took advantage of the Nation, and process illegal marijuana at Benally’s farms in Shiprock and at a motel in nearby Farmington. “I lost my job in California because of the pandemic back in March,” Qinliang Wang told Searchlight, speaking in Mandarin. “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.”

No one mentioned that the job involved marijuana, he added. Instead, he was told he’d be “trimming flowers” in New Mexico for $200 per day. Shortly after the interview, local law enforcement raided the motel and arrested Wang and 16 other workers, charging them with multiple felonies. The district attorney later dropped the charges, after the New Mexico Crime Victim Reparation Commission, the state public defender’s office, and The Life Link, a Santa Fe-based service provider, determined the workers were hard-working innocent people,” said Lynn Sanchez, human trafficking aftercare director at The Life Link. One of the workers took the job in Shiprock so he could buy medication for his daughter in China, who had a serious heart condition, Sanchez said. After the charges against him were dropped in Farmington, he took another job with one of Benally’s associates in Oklahoma, where he was arrested and sent to an immigration detention facility in Colorado. While locked up, unable to send money home, his daughter died.

The workers are still suffering profoundly, said Aaron Halegua, their attorney in the civil suit. Their mugshots were published in Chinese-language media, causing them to “lose face amongst friends, relatives and the broader community.” Drug offenses are taken “extremely seriously” in China, he said.

BRAZEN FARMS, BOGUS PERMITS

From the start, Benally’s enterprise stood out both for its scale and its brazenness. Beginning in 2019, when he was president of a local farm board, Benally began issuing bogus cannabis cultivation permits, paving the way for him and his business partners to start growing marijuana. A 2020 investigation by Searchlight revealed that the farms, operating under the guise of a commercial hemp operation, were staffed by more than 1,000 workers brought to New Mexico from predominantly Chinese neighborhoods in Los Angeles and New York. Other workers were Navajo children, some as young as 10, Searchlight found.

In September, a tribal court ordered Benally to immediately cease growing cannabis, but he nonetheless continued. He could also potentially face criminal charges related to the November 2020 raid, when federal, state, local and tribal law enforcement agents descended on the Shiprock farms.

Benally fled the area before the bust and was initially presumed to be in hiding, according to then-Navajo Police Chief Phillip Franciscos. In the meantime, some of his associates and scores of Shiprock workers relocated to Oklahoma, Searchlight found. Law enforcement eventually shut down those farms, as well. But there was always new territory to explore. In 2021, Benally reemerged in public and tried to set up a marijuana operation on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, the Ogallala Sioux Tribal Council promptly barred him from conducting business there.

Next, he returned to the Navajo Nation and tried his hand at politics. In 2022, he entered the primary race for president. (He lost, garnering 10 percent of the vote.) He maintained a public profile, attending candidate forums and mingling with the crowds on the day of the Navajo Nation presidential inauguration.

It was a year of big changes for the recreational cannabis market: New Mexico had legalized adult use, and in 2022, the first licensed sales began. By October, Benally received his two state-sanctioned marijuana farming permits at the land in Estancia as well as in Waterflow, just east of the Navajo Nation. State cannabis regulations prevent the licensing of anyone who has been convicted of certain felony crimes, including drug offenses or hiring underage labor for an illegal drug operation, according to RLD spokesperson Andrea Brown. But the agency cannot deny a grow license if an applicant has not been convicted, Brown said.

Benally has not been convicted, but some of his associates have been brought in. Law enforcement in California and Oklahoma targeted at least two of his former business partners. Most notable among them was Irving Lin, who helped supply labor, investors and logistics to the Shiprock farms. Lin was arrested in February 2022 after a series of raids on illegal marijuana farms in California.

CONCRETE EVIDENCE

Across the fertile farmland around Shiprock, Benally’s now-defunct cannabis grows still mark the landscape. The scattered greenhouses and concrete foundations sunk into the earth prevent the land from returning to its prior purpose of growing corn — a crop sacred to the Navajo.

The cannabis infrastructure is being preserved as evidence, said Redfeather-Bennally, currently the vice president of the local farm board. And because federal cases take precedence, Navajo law enforcement largely must wait for the U.S. attorney’s office to resolve its case before the Navajo Nation can act.

The Navajo Police Department and Attorney General’s Office spent “a lot of resources” to crack the Benally case, said former Navajo Police Chief Phillip Franciscos.

“It is frustrating that we did all that and there hasn’t really been any resolution to it as far as charges...and then [Benally] continues on trying to find other places to do the same kind of issues,” said Franciscos, now the police chief in neighboring Bloomfield.

IMPACT:

UPDATE: 02/02/2024

After this story was published, New Mexico ordered Dinen Benally and a neighboring business to pay fines of $1 million each — the largest fines ever issued against cannabis producers in the state, according to the Regulation and Licensing Department. The department had dispatched inspectors to Benally’s farm after receiving questions from Searchlight. Benally’s conduct was “egregious” and the violations at his farm were “at a scale we hadn’t seen before,” said Cannabis Control Division Director Todd Stevens. In addition to the record-breaking fines, the state announced that it had revoked Benally’s license, citing a “blatant disregard for public health and safety, and for the rule of law.” The neighboring farm, also highlighted in Searchlight’s reporting, lost its license as well.
On the Mescalero Apache Reservation, four days of dancing mark the passage into womanhood, testing a girl’s endurance — and enveloping her in tradition.

AN APACHE CEREMONY FOR THE AGES

An Apache Ceremony for the Ages

On the Mescalero Apache Reservation, four days of dancing mark the passage into womanhood, testing a girl’s endurance — and enveloping her in tradition.

STORY & PHOTOS BY MICHAEL BENANAV
SEPTEMBER 6, 2023
On the first morning of the ceremony, Seaven runs four times, starting from the big teepee, around a basket placed in a field, and back again. The basket — filled with eagle feathers, cattail pollen, tobacco and other ritual items — is initially set some 50 yards away, then is moved closer each time. The runs are said to represent the four stages of life, from baby to girl to adult to elder — the hope being that Seaven will be fortunate enough to experience all of them. She wears a fringed and beaded buckskin dress adorned with metal “jingles” made from cut-up soda cans; the dress evokes White Painted Woman, whom maidens are said to embody during their ceremony.

The ceremony’s centerpiece is dancing. Each night inside the big teepee (where photography is prohibited), Seaven performs traditional steps by the edge of an oak-fueled fire, the sound of her jingles joining the rhythms of the rattles from a group of four chanters, led by medicine man Bo Kaydahzinne. “The medicine woman takes care of the maiden; the medicine man takes care of what goes on in the big teepee,” Platta explains. On each of the first three nights, Seaven dances for several hours, essentially practicing for the fourth, when she will dance until dawn, with only a short rest. “We sing about everything — the cattle hide she dances on, the teepee poles, the rattles, the mountains, the sky and all of the animals — on land, under the ground, in the air,” says chanter Byron Blake.

At sunrise on the first morning, a team of men erects the “big teepee” on the reservation in south-central New Mexico. Some are Seaven’s friends and family, but many work for the Mescalero Apache Natural Resources Department, which offers employees time to help with every coming-of-age ceremony. The tribe also provides huge stacks of firewood, picnic tables, trash collection and cash donations to ease the financial burden on the girl’s family. Although the heart of these ceremonies takes four days, the events span 12 days total, including set-up and tear-down time. Aside from helping to keep traditions alive, the tribe’s contributions convey a sense that these are truly community events, for everyone’s benefit.

Medicine woman Uretta Platta coaches Seaven as the ceremony begins and will guide her throughout, offering instructions not only for each element of the ritual but also for her life going forward. Platta’s spiritual lessons are rooted in the challenges of the everyday. “I tell her to continue with her education, to go out into the world, to not have kids too early — and to watch her surroundings,” Platta says. “I want her to have a good life.”
As important as Seaven’s actions is the role of family and friends who have come to support her. They not only encourage her to go on in the face of exhaustion but are there to send her into womanhood with heartfelt hopes for her future.

On the fifth morning, after Seaven has danced nearly all night in the big teepee, medicine man Kaydahzinne brushes her with white clay, completing her transformation into White Painted Woman. It is said that White Painted Woman was the mother of the legendary war-riors Killer of Enemies and Child of Water, who defeated the evil monsters that threatened to wipe humans from the Earth. She also was a great healer who was pure of heart and a “model of heroic and virtuous womanhood.” It’s hoped that these qualities will remain with Seaven for the rest of her life.

At the close of the ceremony, Seaven repeats the basket runs that she made on the first morning, only in reverse — this time, the basket is placed successively farther away. On the last of her four runs, Seaven keeps going, far beyond the basket, as far as she can go after dancing all night. On her return, she wipes the white clay off of her face. At its core, the ceremony aims to teach Apache girls how to tap their reserves of inner strength, which are far deeper than they ever imagined — and that, “when they feel weak, they can pick themselves up and push through it,” Courtney Naiche, one of the cooks, said. It’s the kind of knowledge that is an invaluable gift for any 13-year-old, particularly when wrapped in the age-old traditions of her ancestors. As for Seaven’s passage into womanhood, her parents, Lorilee and Jess Martinez, said it wouldn’t change their relationship with her at all. “She’ll always be my little girl,” said Jess.

Outside of the big teepee, masked and body-painted Crown Dancers, who represent the Mountain Gods, dance around a huge bonfire, ringed by a crowd of people who have come to watch. A group of men sing and drum behind the dancers. “They dance to bless the maiden, to bless the fire, and to keep bad spirits away,” Platta says.

Tribal ceremonies like these were outlawed by the U.S. government under the 1883 Code of Indian Offenses, an attempt to eliminate “heathenish” rites and force tribes to join mainstream Christian society. According to one elder, the Mescalero Apache ceremonies stopped altogether for several decades; her own grandmother became the first girl to have her coming-of-age ceremony after the ban was enacted. “She had it in secret,” said Donalyn Torres. Other girls slowly followed her lead. At one point, “a soldier found out about it, and everyone was afraid he would squeal, but it turned out that he didn’t tattletale. So more and more people began doing it again, even though it was against the law.” The ceremonies became legal with the passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978, and today they are vital elements of Apache life.

On the third night, Seaven leaves the big teepee to join other women in dancing around the bonfire, as Crown Dancers offer their blessings.
Searchlight New Mexico publishes investigative reporting forward in 2023. The journalists at Searchlight wish to acknowledge the individuals whose time, money and advice pushed us forward in 2023.

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A FEW DAYS AFTER BEGINNING A NEW POST at Los Alamos National Laboratory, Jason Archuleta committed a subversive act: He began to keep a journal. Writing in a tiny spiral notebook, he described how he and his fellow electricians were consigned to a dimly lit breakroom in the heart of the weapons complex.

“Did nothing all day today over 10 hrs in here,” a July 31 entry read. “This is no good for one’s mental wellbeing or physical being.”

“I do hope to play another good game of chess,” noted another entry, the following day.

A journeyman electrician and proud member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers 611, Archuleta, 49, had been assigned to Technical Area 55 back in July. He had resisted the assignment, knowing that it was the location of “the plant,” a sealed fortress that it was the location of “the plant,” a sealed fortress.

But from the inside, Archuleta tells a different story: that of a jobsite in which productivity has come to a standstill. With few exceptions, he says, electricians nap, standup meetings, they describe is consistent. At any given time, between eight and 25 electricians are cooling their heels in at least three different breakrooms. LANL even has an expression for it: “seat time.”

The lab acknowledges that the expansion at TA-55, and especially the plant, presents challenges unseen in any other industrial setting in the nation. The risk of radiation exposure is a constant consideration, one-of-a-kind parts must be ordered; security clearances are needed and construction takes place alongside the plant’s mission to meet its quota. That can mean many workers sit for days, weeks — or even, according to several sources, months at a time.

“I haven’t seen months,” said Kelly Beierschmitt, LANL’s deputy director of operations, “It might feel like months,” he added, citing the complications that certain projects pose. “If there’s not a [radiation control technician] available, I’m not gonna tell the craft to go do the job without the support, right?”

Such revelations come as a red flag to independent government watchdogs, who note that the project is already billions of dollars over budget and at least four years behind schedule. They say that a workplace filled with idle workers is not merely an indication of wasted taxpayer money, but, more importantly, a symptom of a poorly managed expansion.

“If you have a whistleblower claiming that a dozen electricians have been sitting around playing cards for six months on a big weapons program, that would seem to me to be a ‘where there is smoke, there is fire’ moment,” said Geoff Wilson, an expert on fraud, waste and abuse at the Project on Government Oversight.

The code of secrecy is almost palpable. The lab sits astride a forbidding mesa in northern New Mexico some 7,500 feet above sea level, protected on the city’s western flank by security checkpoints. Its cardinal site, TA-55, is ringed by layers of razor wire and a squadron of armed guards, themselves bolstered by armored vehicles with mounted turrets that patrol the perimeter day and night.

AT LOS ALAMOS NATIONAL LABORATORY, WORKERS COLLECT FULL SALARIES FOR DOING NOTHING.

BY ALICIA INEZ GUZMÁN | PHOTO BY MICHAEL BENANAV | NOVEMBER 8, 2023

study the electrical code book, and play games of chess, dominos and tic-tac-toe. On rare occasions, they work, but as four other journeyman (who all requested anonymity for fear of retaliation) confirmed, the scenario they describe is consistent. At any given time, between eight and 25 electricians are cooling their heels in at least three different breakrooms. LANL even has an expression for it: “seat time.”

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It is virtually impossible to quantify anything having to do with Los Alamos, given the all-pervasive secrecy that surrounds the lab. That obsession is the subject of Alex Wellerstein’s 2021 book, “Restricted Data: The History of Nuclear Secrecy in the United States.” Wellerstein, a historian of science at Stevens Institute of Technology, describes how that culture has evolved from the earliest years of the Manhattan Project into the present. Across those decades, the notion of keeping secrets from adversaries has simultaneously morphed into keeping secrets from the American public — and regulators.

“What secrecy does is it creates context for a lack of oversight,” said Wellerstein in a recent interview. “It shrinks the number of people who might even be aware of an issue and it makes it harder — even if things do come out — to audit.”

The lab sits astride a forbidding mesa in northern New Mexico some 7,500 feet above sea level, protected on the city’s western flank by security checkpoints. Its cardinal site, TA-55, is ringed by layers of razor wire and a squadron of armed guards, themselves bolstered by armored vehicles with mounted turrets that patrol the perimeter day and night. No one without a federal security clearance is allowed to enter or move about without an escort — even to go to the bathroom. Getting that clearance, which requires an intensive background investigation, can take more than a year.

Sources for this story, veterans and newcomers alike, said they fear losing their livelihoods if they speak publicly about anything to do with their work. Few jobs in the region, much less the state (one of the most impoverished in the nation), can compete with the salaries offered by LANL. Here, journeyman electricians can earn as much as $150,000 a year; Archuleta makes $53 per hour, almost 70 percent more than electricians at other union sites.

Nevertheless, in late September, Archuleta lodged a complaint with the Inspector General’s office alleging time theft. He and two other workers told Searchlight New Mexico that their timesheets — typically filled out by supervisors — have shown multiple codes for jobs they didn’t recognize or perform. To his mind, the situation is
“Most people think that for something so giant and so supposedly important to the nation, there would be some kind of well-thought-through plan. There is no well-thought-through plan. There never has been.” — GREG MELLO, Los Alamos Study Group

“not just bordering on fraud, waste and abuse, it’s crossing the threshold.”

After checking into the allegations, LANL officials told Searchlight they didn’t add up. “The information we received about how craft workers report their time does not align with what you were told,” a spokesperson wrote in an email. “Any statement about falsifying time,” she added, “is extremely serious.”

‘NEW MANHATTAN PROJECT’

What to others is the “new Manhattan Project,” is to LANL director Thom Mason “the ultimate guarantor of our security” — replacing the plutonium in the nation’s nuclear arsenal. J. Robert Oppenheimer’s original project cost taxpayers about $30 billion in today’s dollars, with overruns, the current mission will almost double that.

Yet there remains an unavoidable question at the core of the nation’s current undertaking: Is the replacement actually warranted? “It’s sort of glass half full, glass half empty,” Mason himself acknowledged in a LANL publication two years ago. The majority of America’s plutonium pits are about 40 years old, made at the height of America’s pit production in the 1980s. “We can’t prove that [those plutonium pits] will fail, but we also can’t prove that they will work,” he said, emphasizing the uncertainty.

LANL — home of the world’s first atomic bomb and one of the nation’s three weapons labs — has long sought to bring industrial-scale pit production back to its campus. Those efforts began even before the Rocky Flats Plant in Colorado, which at its height produced between 1,000 and 2,000 pits per year, was shut down by the FBI for gross environmental crimes in 1992. Over the decades since, four attempts were made to transfer some of that capability to Los Alamos. Each ended in total failure, either for lack of political will, lack of need, poor infrastructure or excessive costs.

This fifth attempt comes amid anxieties about China’s recent expansion of its nuclear arsenal and Russia’s war on Ukraine. Both have raised the prospect of a frightening new Cold War in which the U.S. is vying for nuclear supremacy with not one, but two global superpowers.

“By all the normal measures our society uses to evaluate cost, benefit, risk, reliability, and longevity, this latest attempt has now already failed as well,” said Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group (LASG), a nonprofit that has been monitoring LANL for 34 years. “Federal decision-makers will have to ask, ‘Will the LANL product still be worth the investment?” Mello said, referring to the plant, which will have exceeded its planned lifetime of 50 years by 2028. The cogs of this arms race have been turning for years.

In May 2018, a few months after President Donald Trump tweeted that he had a much “bigger and more powerful” nuclear button than North Korea’s Kim Jong-un, the Nuclear Weapons Council certified a recommendation to produce plutonium pits at two sites.

Its recommendation was enacted into law by Congress, which in 2020 called for an annual quota of plutonium pits — 30 at LANL and 50 at the Savannah River plutonium processing facility in South Carolina — by 2030. According to the LASG, the cost per pit production at LANL is greater than Savannah River — for a fraction of the pits. The organization estimates that each one will run approximately $100 million.

Whether those production goals are achievable is another question. Just getting those two sites capable of meeting the quota will cost close to $50 billion — and take up to two decades. After that, another half a century may pass before the nation’s approximately 4,000 plutonium pits are upgraded, according to the calculations of former deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear matters, Peter Fanta.

“Want to know where 80 pits per year came from? It’s math. Alright? It’s really simple math,” Fanta was reported as telling the Aiken Standard, a South Carolina newspaper. “Divide 80 per year by the number of active warheads we have — last time it was unclassified it was just under 4,000 — and you get a timeframe.”

QUESTIONS AND QUANDARIES

As a U.S. Air Force veteran, so much “seat time” ran counter to Jason Archuleta’s patriotic virtues. It also ran counter to common sense. LANL was on a historic hiring spree, justified by the need to modernize the nation’s nuclear stockpile and roll out several major infrastructure projects, intrinsic to the expansion. Suddenly, it seemed that everyone, union and non-union, was going to TA-55, the very center of the weapons mission. Yet, looking around, he calculated that there was “over 200 years of experience sitting in a break room.”

Archuleta’s union has been the lab’s partner ever since the earliest years of the Manhattan Project. Beginning in the 1940s, electricians from IBEW local 611 crossed from the Rio Grande Valley, a mosaic of Hispanic and Indigenous villages, into Los Alamos to install and maintain the lab and the burgeoning city’s utilities.

But when Archuleta was given his reassignment in July, he was torn. He had already been working at LANL for one year and was happy in his job. He had no desire to participate in TA-55’s historic expansion on moral grounds. He voiced his objections to Triad National Security, the private company that manages LANL, and was informed he had no choice. According to the “red book,” the five-year agreement between Triad and the union, workers were prohibited from striking. At the same time, Triad reserved the right to “hire, suspend, promote, demote, transfer, or discharge employees,” as it saw fit. His only option would be to “drop up” — in union speak, resign. Doing so would force him to seek work at union sites with “open calls,” all of which are in or around Albuquerque, almost 100 miles from where he and generations of his family have made their home in the Española Valley.

He said he called New Mexico’s two Democratic senators, Martin Heinrich and Ben Ray Luján, multiple times to share his concerns. Each time, he left a message with his name and the details of his mom’s cancer, which animated his fears around working near nuclear materials. After a career spent at the Nevada Test Site and LANL, as well as Rocky Flats, where she did environmental cleanup, Bernadette Archuleta died in 2018 of non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. The Department of Energy paid her a settlement a month before her death, her son said, but never acknowledged culpability.

Archuleta’s messages went unanswered. (Heinrich’s office has no record of his calls, according to a staffer; Luján’s office ignored multiple requests for comment.) Both senators have given their full support to plutonium...
pit production at Los Alamos. They’ve also been integral to keeping the mission — and the federal dollars it rakes in — in New Mexico.

“Rexam steadfast in my commitment to ensuring our national labs’ success and tapping into their full potential to fuel a strong economic base for our whole state,” Heinrich declared in 2019.

Hard-pressed to drive 200 miles a day, Archuleta decided, grudgingly, to go to TA-55, joining the approximately 430 craft workers — electricians, carpenters, plumbers, sheet metal workers, masons, painters, welders and maintenance staff — stationed there and at a sister site, TA-50. His arrival coincided with the peak of summer. The air conditioning was spotty and there were so few chairs in the break room that some people had to stand. The journeymen wanted to work, but amidst one of the nation’s most ambitious capital projects, Archuleta and his fellow electricians “were getting sent to go sit on our hands.”

‘CREDIBLE LIFETIMES’

Government and independent watchdogs question the mission’s very logic, often citing a widely circulated report published in 2007 by JASON, an independent group of scientists that advises the U.S. government on matters of science and technology. Plutonium pits, the group stated, “are byzantine they defy tracking.”

The uncertainty has worked in LANL’s favor, propelling the mission forward and all but securing the lab’s transformation. As Beerschmitt publicly described LANL’s goals this summer: “Keep spending and hiring.”

Meanwhile, the Government Accountability Office, which investigates federal spending and provides its findings to Congress, has pointed to a gaping blind spot in the mission. A January report detailed how the NNSA lacked a comprehensive budget and master schedule for the entire U.S. weapons complex — key components for achieving the goal of producing 80 pits per year.

“Most people think that for something so giant and so supposedly important to the nation, there would be some kind of well-thought-through plan,” said Mello of LASG. “There is no well-thought-through plan. There never has been.”

SECRET ON THE PLATEAU

In 1950, at the dawn of the new era of arms control and deterrence, the lab was at a crossroads. One member of the newly-formed Atomic Energy Commission not only questioned the cost overruns of two of its major construction projects — but also the whole point of maintaining the lab in Los Alamos.

“Be happy. Show up to work. Do your stretch and flex and go home. And don’t ask questions,” Archuleta described the environment. “But I wanna ask questions.”

“By all the normal measures our society uses to evaluate cost, benefit, risk, reliability, and longevity, this latest attempt has now already failed.”

— GREG MELLO, Los Alamos Study Group

and abuse — and has done so since 1990. A major reason is the Môbius strip of contractors and subcontractors working on DOE-related projects at any given time.

The DOE, for instance, oversees the NNSA, which oversees Triad National Security — a company composed of Battelle Memorial Institute, the Texas A&M University System and the University of California. Triad oversees its own army of subcontractors on lab-related projects, including construction, demolition and historic preservation. And many of those subcontractors outsource their work to still other subcontractors, creating money trails so Byzantine they defy tracking.

But one thing is known: Of the $5.5 billion that LANL plans to spend on construction over the next five years, $2.5 billion will be diverted to subcontractors, according to a 2019 lab document.

Meanwhile, the number of employees keeps growing. From there, go to a safety briefing and complete the minute away, to arrive on-site by 5:30. Wait for an escort and across the U.S. weapons complex have ossified into their own little universes,” said Wellerstein, the historian.

And when you combine that with the kind of contractor system they use for nuclear facilities, you create the circumstances where there’s very little serious oversight and ample opportunities and incentives for everybody to put themselves on the back for a job well done.”

As for Archuleta, the days blur together with numbing sameness: Get up at 3:45 a.m., drive from España, 30 minutes away, to arrive on-site by 5:30. Wait for an escort with a security clearance and head into the hulking complex. Empty pockets, remove work boots and belt, pass through several vestibules and two machines — one to detect radioisotopes, another to detect metal. From there, go to a safety briefing and complete the daily “stretch and flex,” part of everyone’s morning warm-up ritual.

Then the sitting begins, as he and a revolving crew of electricians are “doomed to the break room,” where they watch the hours crawl by. A four-day work week, he penned in his journal, feels like eight.

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“There is no well-thought-through plan. There never has been.”
The décor inside the Bernalillo County Youth Services Center (YSC) is more in line with the children’s wing of your local library than a jail built for kids. The walls and furniture are painted in bright colors and classrooms line a hallway just a short walk from a common room filled with therapeutic rocking chairs. Out back, the children — strictly referred to as “residents,” never inmates — are encouraged to tend a communal garden or navigate a multi-story rope obstacle course — the tallest of its kind in all New Mexico, according to the county.

But behind the vibrant colors and soothing rocking chairs, the state’s largest juvenile detention center suffers from the same severe understaffing that plagues institutions across New Mexico. Inside, children between the ages of 12 and 17 are routinely subjected to strip searches, held for weeks in cells without toilets, and left with only a thin plastic sheet to block out the glare of hallway lights that never turn off. Girls face particularly harsh conditions, often placed in what advocates call the equivalent of solitary confinement.

In the words of YSC Director Michael Ferstl, the facility was once “a five-star hotel” that now resembles “a dirty car that’s got snow from last winter still on it.” Persisting with that simile, he adds that it’s driven by a “very progressive” crew with their “hearts in the right place.” It just “needs to be washed.” Pushed harder, Ferstl acknowledges that “there’s roads we won’t go down because it’ll get even dirtier.”

Advocates and families say it’s already pretty dirty. They refer to chronic understaffing — a recent count...
found that nearly 70 percent of guard positions are going unstaffed, according to the jail's leadership. They refer to the fact that some of the children are held, sometimes for weeks, in temporary booking cells with no toilets or sinks. And they refer to the use of strip searches, a practice that’s been widely condemned as “state-imposed trauma.”

Alexis Pina, 21, says she was strip searched approximately 150 times over the course of her three-year stay in the detention center, where she was being held for second-degree murder. She recounted the process: Remove your socks and wiggle your toes. Take off your pants, under-wear, bra and hair tie. Turn around, squat with your hands in the air and cough three times. When she refused to participate, she says, she was often locked in her cell until she consented. Strip searches at the facility are supposed to be rare. In 2019, Bernalillo County invested in two machines — CellSense, a contraband and cellphone detector, and Ionscan 600, an explosives and narcotics detector — Cellsense routinely takes on extended overtime shifts.

But these machines sometimes break and go offline for extended periods. Though officials decline to give specifics on how long or how often the machines crash, they acknowledge that strip searches are employed whenever that happens.

Pina says that in her three years at the facility it was a regular occurrence.

“Every time you leave the facility, they have to strip search you because the machine that they have to test whether or not you have drugs doesn’t work,” she says. “Conditions were so bad for me that I wanted to kill myself. I couldn’t handle it.”

While strip searching is still widely practiced in juvenile facilities across the country, lawmakers have taken steps to limit or abolish the practice. Some states have banned it outright.

“We have a criminal justice system that purports to be about supporting young people in growth and development, giving young people second chances,” says Jessica Feierman, senior managing director at the Juvenile Law Center, a national nonprofit based in Philadelphia. “If young people enter the facility and face a strip search, they can’t develop positive relationships with staff. They can’t feel comfortable. They may be traumatized. They may be triggered based on past sexual assault.”

Feierman told Searchlight New Mexico that he is tired of states allowing the practice, which advocates like Pina and Garcia equate to little more than a rubber stamp — are typically made following scheduled visits by the state Children, Youth and Families Department.

LACK OF STAFF, LASTING IMPACTS

While strip searches pose one of the greatest concerns to juvenile advocates, families and local advocates point to understaffing as an equally important issue. And it is hardly unique to the Bernalillo County Youth Services Center. The Metropolitan Detention Center, New Mexico’s largest jail, has long been plagued by the same problem, as have all the state’s prisons. Schools and hospitals across New Mexico are also feeling the squeeze.

But advocates worry that the lack of staff at the Youth Services Center could negatively impact the long-term rehabilitation of troubled children and teens. Nationally and in New Mexico, there has been a growing emphasis on treating detained children as children — not as little adults — and ensuring they don’t miss out on important childhood experiences.

To that end, maintaining high levels of staffing is a critical factor in operating the 78-bed facility. On a recent day, according to Feierman, 69 percent of the facility’s jobs were unstaffed. Only 30 of the 96 youth guard positions were filled. Internal staffing reports show those employ-ees routinely take on extended overtime shifts.

But during a recent tour of the jail by Searchlight, Ferstl denied that understaffing presented a dire problem; the facility, he says, consistently maintains a ratio of one guard to every eight inmates.

Floyd Yazzie of Albuquerque says he has gone months without seeing his 16-year-old son, who was detained at the center for six months before being transferred to another state facility. Though in-person visitation is set at two visits per week, Yazzie and other members of the family were turned away for Christmas and the boy’s birthday — all because of understaffing.

“You look forward to, you know, your memories of Christ-mas and holidays with your family,” Yazzie says, “and they just rip that away from you.”

Officials also point to annual audits conducted by the state, which have found the detention center in “substantial compliance” with statewide standards. Those audits — which advocates like Pina and Garcia equate to little more than a rubber stamp — are typically made following scheduled visits by the state Children, Youth and Families Department.

Girls may disproportionately bear the burden. Despite millions of dollars spent on renovating the 61-year-old fa-cility, it is girls who are most often placed in cells without sinks or toilets. They are detained — sometimes for more than a week at a time — in booking cells, where the 24/7 overhead lights can only be blocked by a plastic sheet over a door window.

Feierman of the Juvenile Law Center says girls often find themselves “in the equivalent of solitary” confinement because they make up a smaller portion of detained youth. In the Bernalillo County facility, only eight of the 52 inmates are girls.

A 2012 report from the Georgetown Center on Pov-erty, Inequality and Public Policy says girls’ needs often go unmet in a “system that was designed for boys.” And research from the University of Texas at Austin, published in 2015, says girls are at greater risk than boys of serving longer sentences and having serious mental health needs.

When a child is locked up in a cell with no toilet, they have to wait for an escort to take them to a bathroom. If it’s a particularly understaffed day, they may have to wait for hours.

“I waited two and a half hours on Christmas Day to use the bathroom,” Pina says. “I wasn’t drinking water. I wasn’t eating my food, because I had to use the bathroom so often and they weren’t letting me out.”

Albino Garcia, the founder and executive director of the grassroots community organization La Plazita Insti-tute and a member of the statewide Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee, echoes Feierman. He says Pina’s ex-perience amounted to “essentially solitary confinement.”

Facility leaders flatly deny that accusation, saying it’s not solitary confinement because the youth are “never” confined to a cell for 22 hours or more per day, the widely-accepted definition of solitary. If they’ve been held in the booking cells, Deputy Director Stanley Gray says, it’s been as a quarantine measure to make sure they don’t inadvertently spread Covid-19 throughout the facility.
start receiving aid through the program, leaving them in limbo at one of the most vulnerable periods of their lives. According to their attorneys, teens can be so traumatized by their time in foster care that they refuse any offer of assistance from the agency after they’ve aged out. They’re determined to leave the state’s orbit completely. Here are the stories of two young women who aged out last year. Although their stories are different in many ways, one difference stands out: In the months after leaving foster care, one had the consistent support of a caring adult. The other didn’t.

**BIRDIE**

Roberta Gonzales, who goes by Birdie, was 10 years old when she and her younger brother were taken out of their aunt’s home in Albuquerque and placed in foster care. Her brother was adopted; Gonzales has not seen him since. CYFD never found her a stable home. Instead, she spent the rest of her childhood in residential treatment centers, first in San Marcos, Texas, and then at Desert Hills, one of several mental health facilities in New Mexico that have shut down in the last five years amid allegations of abuse, lawsuits and pressure from state regulators.

By 2019, with fewer residential treatment centers at its disposal, CYFD was increasingly relying on youth homeless shelters to house high-risk kids, including some who were suicidal. Once there, many teens routinely experienced mental health crises or ran away. When no shelters were available, CYFD would house some of them in its Albuquerque office building.

Gonzales was one of these teens. The cots and bean bag chairs at the CYFD office were too uncomfortable to sleep on, she recalled. “I usually just slept on the floor.”

Gonzales turned 18 last year and, after a stint in Las Cruces, moved back to Albuquerque.

One of her favorite things to do was attend services at Calvary Church, which hosts community events like an annual Fourth of July fireworks show, or Sagebrush Church, both in Albuquerque. She said she liked the pastors and the music.

As a former foster youth, Gonzales was entitled to housing assistance from CYFD. The agency helped her start the paperwork when she was 17, but as her 18th...
birthday came and went, she was unclear how the system worked and still had no idea what help she would get or when. Her former caseworker called to check on her periodically, but she never seemed to get the help she needed.

“I got kicked out [of foster care] on my birthday and now I’m homeless,” she said. “CYFD just left me to do this on my own.”

When asked for comment, a CYFD spokesperson said that “Fostering Connections benefits are generally seamless.” It might take time for some youth to receive benefits after they turn 18, but “CYFD staff do assist with the paperwork and resources.”

After Gonzales aged out, an uncle gave her a little money for food, clothes and shelter. The money went fast. Within weeks, she was broke. She lived briefly with a cousin before moving into a Christian adult homeless shelter.

But she found the shelter’s tight quarters and strict rules too stifling and soon decided to leave. She spent much of her time at a downtown bus stop, sometimes riding the bus around town to pass the time.

For a brief period, Gonzales’ uncle paid for a room in a motel so she could have a safe place to sleep for a few nights. The room — complete with a clean bed, pillows and private bathroom — was like heaven, she said.

Later that week, she went to Calvary Church, where a volunteer offered to pray with her. Gonzales had told pastors at both Calvary and Sagebrush churches that she was homeless. She slept that night on a ledge by a bus stop.

But when a security guard spotted her and told her to leave, she walked across the street and settled on the sidewalk.

The following afternoon, Gonzales started to have difficulty breathing and began to feel very hot. After she called 911, paramedics met her under an overpass.

She was taken to the University of New Mexico Hospital and wheeled to a room. “It feels like I’m dying,” she told doctors.

Gonzales had previously been to the UNM Hospital, for various issues, and some of the nurses knew her by name. Being at the hospital wasn’t so bad, she said — it was a comfortable place to sleep for the night, and she could charge her phone.

“Any changes to your address?” doctors asked her while preparing a nebulizer to stabilize her breathing. “I have no address,” she replied.

She stayed at the hospital for several days while the staff monitored her lungs. Doctors later diagnosed her with Castleman disease, a rare disorder that affects the lymph nodes.

More than a year has passed since then. When contacted this fall, Gonzales said she’d reconnected with her mother and talks to her regularly. She said a CYFD Fostering Connections worker has been in touch with her and checks in periodically over the phone. Although CYFD provides job assistance for youth who age out, it hadn’t helped her find a job, she said, so “I’ve been looking myself.” The agency hadn’t helped her find housing either, she added. She did find a place to live, briefly. But it didn’t last.

“I’m homeless again,” she said in September. Until she can find stable housing and a job, she’s living at a homeless shelter in Albuquerque.

“I got kicked out [of foster care] on my birthday and now I’m homeless. CYFD just left me to do this on my own.”
— Birdie Gonzales

NEVAEH

Nevaeh Sanchez was 15 when CYFD investigators determined she needed to be taken into foster care. She and her younger brother had been living with their father in a run-down house in Española that didn’t have running water.

When a caseworker arrived to pick her up, she and her brother were sent to a youth homeless shelter in Taos, where they lived alongside other kids with nowhere to go. CYFD told Sanchez and her brother they would be
With Woodcock’s help, she found a rental with a room of her own.

“I’ve never had a chance to live before now. I’ve been surviving,” Nevaeh Sanchez said.

In May 2021, Sanchez applied for a job as a cashier at the Frontier, a popular restaurant across the street from the University of New Mexico campus. She held the job for two and a half years — even earning three raises for good performance.

“She’s thriving,” Woodcock said.

Another huge step was getting her own cellphone. During her time in foster care, Sanchez’s phone use had been regimented. Most shelters prohibit phones entirely because of liabilities and safety protocols. Last summer, she bought a phone with her own money. But there was an even bigger milestone to tackle: getting a car. With a vehicle of her own, she wouldn’t need to rely on others to get to work or to appointments in a city as sprawling as Albuquerque.

She had already gotten her driver’s license. But Sanchez had no savings. It was nearly impossible to find a used car that she could afford.

Then Woodcock saw a 2001 Dodge Neon for sale. She purchased the car outright for Sanchez, who reimbursed her over the following months. It was a momentous step. She’s now paid back the entire cost of the car — $3,000.

“She’s my role model,” Sanchez said of Woodcock. “I’m very glad that that woman found potential in me and helps me with my life. She sets me up for the right path.”

In October, Sanchez started focusing on her GED full time. In the coming years, she said she hopes to start a business as a cosmetologist or tattoo artist. Her Fostering Connections worker has helped her in making plans for the future, she said.

In the past, “I had nothing — 100% no control over my life. I’m finally getting up for the first time.”
discovered it had been used in a nonfatal drive-by shooting just days before Hulliger called them.

By then, Noah would stand accused of shooting and killing 22-year-old Elijah Mirabal in a drug deal turned shootout. This time, Noah was armed with a semi-automatic “blackout rifle” like those used by U.S. Army Rangers, purchased on Snapchat, according to his mother. Prosecutors allege that Noah and his 18-year-old friend Jaden Sandoval lured him there like “a spider to a fly.”

Today, Hulliger puzzles over everything she might have done differently. “I couldn’t believe that my son was capable of something like this,” she said, adding that he became “a different kid” during the pandemic.

In recent years, youth gun violence has hit a boiling point. In 2022, Albuquerque logged a record 121 homicides; 14 suspects were minors. This year, the Bernalillo County District Attorney’s Office has already logged 120 juvenile criminal cases, 35 of them involving gun crimes. Thirteen children between the ages of 10 and 17 face murder charges, according to the DA’s office.

Nearly 40 percent of households in New Mexico own a firearm, the Department of Health reported in September. Fifteen percent of gun-owning households with a child, nearly one in seven, have a loaded and unlocked firearm, the report found.

The increased shooting deaths in New Mexico come at a time when Americans have bought guns like never before. An estimated 7.5 million people bought their first gun between January 2019 and April 2021, according to the National Library of Medicine. By some counts, Americans have bought more than 60 million guns since the Covid-19 pandemic began.

These figures only reflect legitimate gun purchases made through retailers. They say nothing of under-the-table deals like Noah’s.

Gunshot wounds are the leading cause of death for U.S. children and teens, a reality that also resonates in New Mexico. This summer, a 5-year-old girl was killed in a drive-by shooting allegedly carried out by five teenagers in Albuquerque. A month later, an 11-year-old boy was fatally shot outside of Albuquerque’s Isotopes ballpark.

Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham cited both shootings in September when she signed a controversial public health order prohibiting carrying guns in public in the Albuquerque area.

But government orders will do little to curb a social media marketplace where young people can find military-grade munitions with the tap of a finger, experts and advocates say.

“Laws can’t fix this,” said Miranda Viscoli, co-president of New Mexicans to Prevent Gun Violence. To fix this, “We need to work with youth directly.”

Her nonprofit often brings trauma surgeons and shooting survivors into schools to educate children about the dangers of firearms. Still, bad actors will continue to buy guns illegally, she said. Albuquerque youth can get an illegal weapon for a couple of hundred dollars cash.

“You literally get on Snapchat, and you say, ‘I want to buy a gun,’ and you will get a million people trying to sell you their guns,” said Vanessa Hulliger.

Two-Sides-of-a-Gun

By Joshua Bowling | Photos by Nadav Soroker | November 15, 2023

THE PRELUDE

On a warm Saturday in October 2020, Chris Hulliger glimpsed something shiny under his wife’s broken-down Honda Pilot. He bent down in his Albuquerque driveway and came up with a handgun — a 9mm Glock. His wife, Vanessa, had no doubt to whom it belonged: her oldest son, 17-year-old Noah Duran.

There had been many months of troubling behavior. Noah’s grades at La Cueva High School had slipped dramatically. He’d lost his starting position on the high school football team. And when he went out with his new friends, he often didn’t return until the early hours of the morning. Vanessa suspected he was buying drugs. This was the last straw. Maybe, she told herself, a serious run-in with the law would set him straight.

She immediately called Albuquerque police. When the officers arrived, they handcuffed the boy and seized the gun. Noah refused to say anything, according to the police report.

Everything would hinge on what happened, and what didn’t happen, next. The police didn’t take him in. His family didn’t take his phone away. He was disarmed, but he wouldn’t be for long. He would go out and buy another, bigger gun, and upend the lives of dozens of people forever. Every day across the nation, people like Noah Duran get their hands on powerful weapons and derail the lives of the people around them. When the dust settles and the bodies are buried, countless others — survivors, family members, friends — are left to pick up the pieces.

Unable to find anything to charge Noah with, police unlocked his handcuffs. It would be another month before detectives ran the gun through their system and discovered it had been used in a nonfatal drive-by shooting just days before Hulliger called them.

By then, Noah would stand accused of shooting and killing 22-year-old Elijah Mirabal in a drug deal turned shootout. This time, Noah was armed with a semi-automatic “blackout rifle” like those used by U.S. Army Rangers, purchased on Snapchat, according to his mother. Prosecutors allege that Noah and his 18-year-old friend Jaden Sandoval lured him there like “a spider to a fly.”

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“You literally get on Snapchat, and you say, ‘I want to buy a gun,’ and you will get a million people trying to sell you their guns,” said Vanessa Hulliger.
It was just after 9 p.m. on Oct. 29, 2020, when Albuquerque police received a 911 call about a shooting at North Domingo Baca Park, surrounded by quiet, upper-middle-class neighborhoods.

Elijah Mirabal, 22, was there to sell drugs to a custom-er who, according to police, reached out over Snapchat. As Noah and Jaden Sandoval approached, Elijah held up a bag of cocaine, police said. Noah and Jaden allegedly leveled their weapons at him and told him this was a stick-up. A firefight ensued.

Elijah died from a shot to the head, but not before working his way through the crowd and getting in shootouts? The night Elijah showed up for his rendezvous with Noah and Jaden, it was a roll of the dice over who would be shot and who would walk away.

Elijah Mirabal

THE SHOOTING

But as the pandemic lockdowns strained the economy, he was laid off like millions of other Americans. That's when the drug dealing started.

"It tears you up," Mirabal said. "I know that my boy wasn't supposed to be doing that. He didn't have an excuse. But it never should have happened like this."

Similar thoughts flood Hulliger's mind. On a recent morning, the first anniversary of her son's sentencing, she fought back tears as she pulled out a four-page handwritten letter she sent to the Second Judicial District Court judge presiding over his case.

"People are so quick to treat me like I am less than human. They call me a monster, but I am just a kid who made a lot of stupid mistakes that led me to make the worst decision of my life," he wrote. "I loathe myself on a daily basis. I see kids in here who have nothing, who were set up to fail from the beginning and then there is me who had every opportunity in the world and threw it all away."

The judge sentenced him to 29 years in prison. His friend, Jaden, awaits sentencing.

EPilogue

Vanessa Hulliger breaks open a box of cupcakes for eight women in a downtown Albuquerque office. On this October night, they're holding a birthday celebration. But there is no singing and there are no candles.

The guest of honor sits 80 miles away, confined to a prison cell at Western New Mexico Correctional Facility. Noah Duran is turning 20 and Hulliger, his mother, is determined to mark the occasion. It's been just over a year since she formed this support group of women, joined together by the tragic fact that each of their teenage sons has either been charged with or convicted of murder.

Like Hulliger, the mothers all say they never allowed guns in the house — but that buying a handgun or an assault rifle was as simple for their boys as downloading an app.

"I sit there, and I cry, and I ask why all the time," said Hulliger. "It tears you up," Mirabal said. "I know that my boy wasn't supposed to be doing that. He didn't have an excuse. But it never should have happened like this."

Many of the families in Hulliger's group say their boys fell into bad crowds during the pandemic lockdowns, when schools closed and they had little to do.

In many cases, the pain of loss is almost interchangeable for families on both sides of the violence.

Losing his only son has been an isolating experience, Mirabal said. He's felt pressure to "man up" and internalize his emotions. That's only made his grief worse. "It seems that us dads are pushed aside. We're told to be a man," he recalled, openly weeping. "I am a man, but I miss my son."

Hulliger often finds herself weeping, too. "Their family is an understaffed facility that subjects them to strip searches and places them in what critics and former detainees have called "essentially" solitary confinement."

The siblings of these young inmates are also among the victims. Noah's 10-year-old brother has spent hours trying to figure out how old he'll be when his big brother gets out of prison in Grants.

On the western outskirts of town, Elijah's father, Mirabal, also feels lost. How did his beloved boy — a formidable lineman on the football team, a baptized Christian and a Navy sharpshooter — sink so low that he was selling drugs and getting in shootouts? The night Elijah showed up for his rendezvous with Noah and Jaden, it was a roll of the dice over who would be shot and who would walk away.
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