

Homelessness and poor health outcomes intertwined

Pecos Valley Public Services Photo

A volunteer with Pecos Valley Public Services (PVPS) checks on a homeless campsite while on a night patrol during a cold snap in Chaves County. The volunteers told clients about the dangers of hypothermia and warned about fires in closed areas. The volunteers also provided first aid to a few clients and distributed sleeping bags, hot tea and blankets, according to PVPS.



By JIM HILLEY
ROSWELL DAILY RECORD

People who are homeless are more likely to get sick, hurt or even die from preventable causes, according to a report from the New Mexico Department of Health (NMDOH).

The report, titled "A Novel Strategy for Counting Persons Experiencing Homelessness and Describing Their Health Outcomes in New Mexico Healthcare Facilities, 2019-2023," analyzed data from hospitals statewide to more accurately estimate the number of homeless and to better understand their health conditions. The report examined key demographic and clinical factors, including medical issues and mortality factors, according to the NMDOH.

The fact that homeless people

are more likely to have health issues is not a surprise to Michaela Merz, executive director of Pecos Valley Public Services (PVPS), a local nonprofit organization that provides medical services to vulnerable populations, including the homeless, in Chaves County.

"The report kind of underlines what we've been saying all along," Merz said. "If you live out on the street in unsanitary conditions, disease is sure to follow."

Dan Jennings, executive director of Hagerman Forward agreed.

"The report reflects exactly what we know, that when there is not engagement with those that are experiencing homelessness, they're less likely to take advantage of primary care," Jennings said.

See **INTERTWINED**, Page A3

Intertwined

Continued from Page A1

He decried the state's failure to fund initiatives such as an *Alianza* project that included homeless outreach, as well as mobile engagement projects and others.

"We were grateful that the state put the funds for these groups to do this around the state, and then turn the results in and show how it helped," Jennings said. "But after that one year of funding, the governor and the legislature did not refund those projects."

According to the report, over a five-year period from 2019 to 2023, New Mexico patient records show 30,882 patients accessing hospital care were experiencing homelessness, including 869 children under five years old.

During that period, 488 homeless people died at the hospitals, the report said, with the most common causes of death being heart attacks and acute kidney failure. Other causes included firearm injuries, cold-related illnesses (i.e., frostbite, hypothermia, cold exposure) and motor vehicle accidents, the report said.

According to the NMDOH analysis, the report demonstrates that statewide healthcare system data can be used to report homelessness and its comorbidities, and the analysis found two to four times more homeless each year than the official count of homelessness in New Mexico, the annual point-in-time (PIT) count.

According to the New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness, the PIT count in 2024 reported 3,140 "unsheltered" in New Mexico, including 214 in Chaves County.

Merz said such reports

are "ridiculous," because they are based on studies where the homeless are invited to participate.

"We know from experience that the vast majority of homeless people couldn't care less," she said.

Merz said there are other studies that put the number of homeless in New Mexico at 20,000.

"I estimate that in Roswell that, depending on the season, we have about 200 to 400 unsheltered people," she said.

"That includes those who live in cars or trucks or in abandoned houses," Merz said.

Many homeless people may have been missed in the NMDOH report, she said.

"The homeless are usually seeking medical attention when nothing else works anymore," Merz said. "They kind of wish it away."

Jennings made a similar observation.

"A lot of them are not going to be connected with a primary care physician, preventative care, harm reduction programs — things like that," he said.

Merz said even when PVPS responds to a report of a homeless person in need of medical attention, they often refuse the help.

She said the homeless often refuse an ambulance, or don't want to go to the hospital, because they face the problem of what is going to happen to their possessions.

"Everything they own on the face of the earth they carry around with them, and an ambulance won't take that," Merz said.

She clarified that ambulances will sometimes allow passengers to take a few small items, such as a bag.

"More often than not, they try to avoid ambulances, and they just go into the emergency room when their condition is an emer-

gency," Merz said.

Hayley Peterson, drug use morbidity epidemiologist for the NMDOH and one of the authors of the report, said the recently released report "contributes to the broader understanding of how housing and health are connected in New Mexico."

Among the 30,882 homeless people included in the report, 66% were male and 34% were female, 39% were white, 39% were Hispanic, 15% were Native American/Alaskan Native, 6% were Black/African American and less than 1% were Asian/Pacific Islander.

The American Indian/Alaskan Native and Black/African American populations were disproportionately represented, the report said.

"Public health approaches that address infectious disease, environmental health, drug overdose, suicide and injury should include strategies to support people experiencing homelessness and promote stable housing," said Dr. Miranda Durham, chief medical officer for the NMDOH.

"Health system interventions like screening for housing needs and linking people to housing services can have positive health impacts," she said.

Jennings said he is hopeful that programs that increase engagement with the homeless can be funded through the state's Opi-

oid Settlement Agreement, which has made funds available to local governments.

He said the 100% Chaves County Initiative is hosting an Opioid Settlement Solutions Summit on May 28 at Eastern New Mexico University-Roswell at which the organization will present recommendations and possible solutions to the city and the county that could help local governments identify what can be done to help combat homelessness, opioid misuse and the associated mental health disorders.

"We had focus groups, we had surveys, we've identified 13 strategies out of 100 that are best practices around the country, and

LOTTERIES

MAY 7

Pick 3 Plus Evening
1-6-6

Pick 4 Plus Evening
8-2-0-4

Roadrunner Cash
8-9-17-33-34

Power Ball
14-15-30-40-59
Power Ball: 20
Double Play
9-31-32-50-57-14

Lotto America
3-6-9-13-17
Star Ball: 8

presented that in a 90-page document, along with strategies of how the county could use an RFP process to get organizations to help

fund those programs," Jennings said.

For more information, visit nmhealth.org or 100ChavesCounty.com.

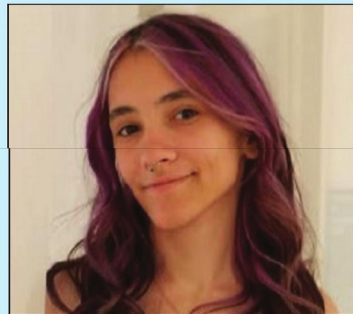
Student of the Month Sponsored by

PROUDLY
Celebrating
OUR STUDENTS



DIONS.COM • 575.578.3944 • 5 MAIN & W WILDY

Goddard High School Student of the Month



Aibhie Clements

Parents: Jacob Clements and Jocelyn Smith

Sponsored by Kiwanis

Mario Hernandez
We are very proud of you as you close your first chapter in life. Keep going strong. From Mom, Dad and Yulie

Freshen Up Your Day!
SUNSHINE LAUNDRY
1906 S. Main St. 575.622.6931

Drop Off Services Available All Day
Dry Cleaning & Alterations
We Wash and Dry Oilfield Clothes

Open 6:00am to 8:00pm Mon. - Sat. Last load at 6:30pm
Sun. 6:00am - 7:00pm Last load at 5:30pm