

Higher Education Department invests \$1 million in students' mental health

Written by Staff Reports
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SANTA FE – The New Mexico Higher Education Department has announced that it will award \$1 million to establish and expand mental health services for students on college campuses across the state via funding approved by Gov. Lujan Grisham.

The department is awarding \$50,000 grants to 20 programs across 14 college and university campuses throughout New Mexico as part of its Mental and Behavioral Health Grant Initiative. The funds will be used to expand existing services, add new resources, conduct staff training, and engage in outreach campaigns encouraging students to seek help.

The announcement comes on the heels of the new 988 crisis support line becoming available to New Mexicans 24/7 and partnerships with the Human Services Department and other state

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agencies to create accessible and high-quality behavioral healthcare for all New Mexicans. Providing targeted support to college students can go even further toward helping alleviate the challenges faced by college-going New Mexicans.

“We know students are more likely to succeed when they have support inside and outside of the classroom. Many college students experience unexpected life events, and balancing work, school, and obligations on top of keeping up with their classes can be challenging. Investing in these vital resources is important to ensuring that students have the support they need to stay in school and succeed academically,” Higher Education Secretary Stephanie M. Rodriguez said.

The funds expand upon existing investments made under Lujan Grisham’s administration for wraparound support services that aim to help students stay and succeed in college.

While many college and university campuses already offer counseling and behavioral health services, staffing and resource challenges may limit students’ ability to get support when and how they need it. Funds can be used to expand the capacity of existing staff and make new resources like telehealth and online 24/7 counseling available to students.

“Our main reason for this funding is to provide online counseling. We do have two personal behavioral health coaches, but a lot of times, our students have a crisis in the evenings, and it can be more accessible and comfortable to access services online. Because of cost, we hadn’t been able to do this, but this funding gave us the perfect opportunity to implement this for the fall,” Cathy Mitchell, Vice President of Student Services at New Mexico Junior College, said.

Expanding resources could be especially critical for New Mexico’s small rural campuses and Tribal colleges who may not have access to other services.

“Mental health and behavioral health were severely impacted by the pandemic across many sectors. Being able to work with public higher education institutions and Tribal colleges to address these issues and challenges is something that we are very excited about,” Nathan Moquino, the Higher Education Department Indian Education Department Director, said. “Whether it’s about struggles in the classroom, learning persistence, or being away from home and cultures of origin for the first time, these wraparound support systems are critical for student success in higher education.”

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"The thing we are most excited about is hiring a specialist. If students are in a crisis, we can get services for them, but we haven't really had anything centralized on campus," Carol Linder, Director of Allied Health and Public Service at Luna Community College, said.

According to Linder, over 75% of students at Luna Community College live in communities that were affected by recent wildfires, which impacted their ability to focus on school.

Public emergencies such as COVID and wildfires add additional stress to students who may already be struggling. A study by the American Council on Education found that one in three students meet the criteria for a clinically significant mental health condition and found that students with poor mental health are more likely to have lower GPAs, take longer to complete a degree, or drop out entirely.

"In the context of coming back to campus after the pandemic and after the devastating fires for some campuses, these mental and behavioral health grants provide necessary resources," Higher Education Deputy Secretary Patricia Trujillo, Ph.D said. "Normalizing students using these services is a critical way that we can create student-ready campuses in New Mexico."

In addition to providing help to students currently experiencing crisis, programs like the WISH project at New Mexico Highlands University plan to address underlying issues that contribute to mental distress for students and work with them to develop skills that will help them in the future.

"An analogy I like to use is this: let's say there's a river and people are falling in. You don't just pull them out, but you go upstream and find out why they are falling in," Kimberly Blea, Dean of Students at New Mexico Highlands University, said.

New Mexico colleges and universities submitted proposals to the New Mexico Higher Education Department describing how they plan to directly benefit students. Proposals that incorporated mental health best practices, direct services to high-need student populations, and plan to use innovative outreach strategies were awarded.

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The following campuses and projects have been funded at \$50,000 each:

The Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe: #ReclaimYourMedicineIAIA: Indigenous Prevention, Expressive Arts & Traditional Healing Program

New Mexico Highlands University, Las Vegas: Wellness Initiative for Student Health (WISH)

New Mexico Junior College, Hobbs: Expanded mental health resources and training

New Mexico Military Institute, Roswell: Leadership and Character Development Program: Phase 1: Intra-Personal Skills/Self-Awareness/Wellness

New Mexico State University School of Nursing, Las Cruces: Campus Suicide Prevention Program at a Hispanic Serving Institution on the U.S.-Mexico Border

New Mexico State University – Doña Ana Community College, Las Cruces: DACC health programs expansion

New Mexico State University – Grants: One-Stop to Well-being

Navajo Technical University, Crownpoint: Project Peace: Building Mental Awareness, Erasing Stigma, & Promoting Well-being

Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute, Albuquerque: Supporting the Mental and Behavioral Health Needs of our Tribal College & University Students

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San Juan College, Farmington: SJC AWARE

The University of New Mexico, Albuquerque: UNM Manzanita Clinic Teletherapy Expansion

The University of New Mexico, Albuquerque: Lobo Balance: Stress Management in College

The University of New Mexico Women's Resource Center and El Centro: UNM Women's Resource Center & El Centro de la Raza Mental Health Collaborative

The University of New Mexico – Valencia Campus: UNM Valencia Mental and Behavioral Health Support Program

Luna Community College, Las Vegas – Building Rough Rider Resilience

Central New Mexico Community College, Albuquerque: Wellness CNM

Clovis Community College: Student Wellness Outreach, Education, and Assessment

New Mexico State University, Las Cruces: No Mind Unheard: Creating a Campus Culture of Mental Health Awareness and Promotion. New Mexico State University – Alamogordo Campus: Cultivating Connection through Community

Western New Mexico University, Silver City: WNMU Mental Health Awareness Month

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For more information about the New Mexico Higher Education Department and resources for college students, visit hed.state.nm.us.

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