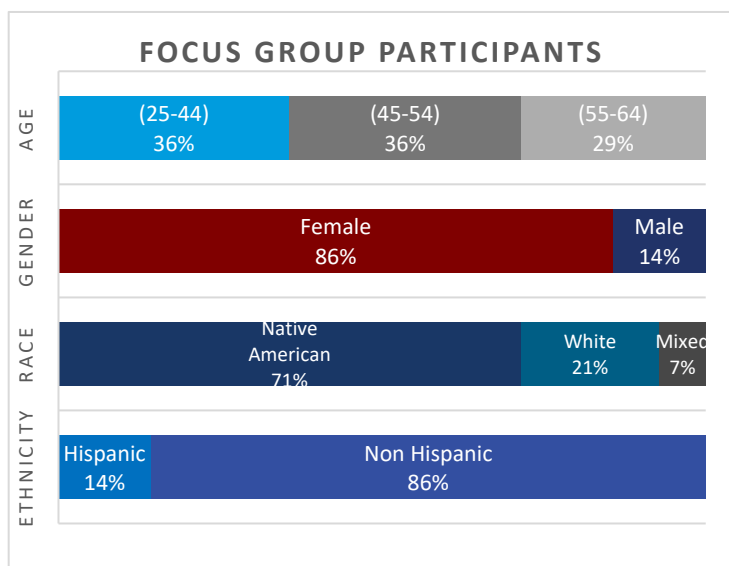


Informing a New Mexico Child and Family Services System Blueprint Voices from McKinley County

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Across New Mexico, Town Halls and Focus Groups are being held to guide the development of a Child and Family Services System Blueprint. This project was proposed by House Majority Floor Leader Gail Chasey. It is funded by Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham.

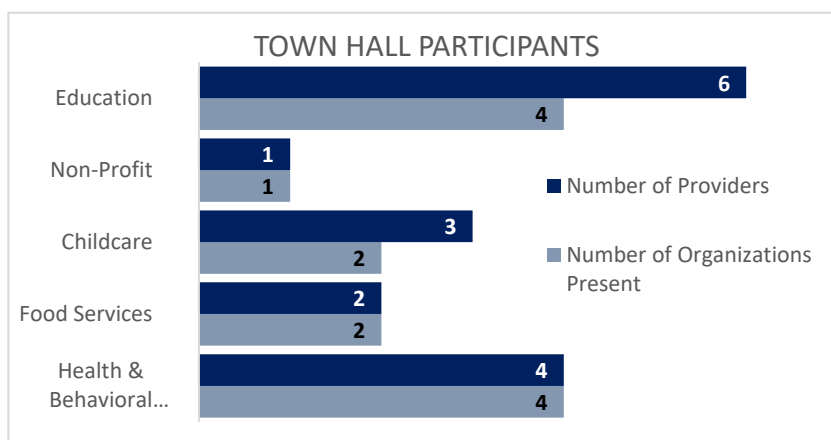
Families and service providers in six counties are sharing their stories about using or providing services. This document shares the results of the McKinley County Town Hall (22 participants) and two focus groups held with community members of McKinley County (14 participants).



The Town Hall and Focus Groups were audio recorded and analyzed by Chapin Hall. Focus group participants included residents who could speak to their experience accessing at least one of the following services: housing assistance, public transportation, food assistance, medical and dental care, behavioral healthcare, and childcare. Participants came ready to share what it was like to access these services, challenges encountered, and changes or improvements they would like to see in each service sector. Focus Group facilitators, supported by a local leader, began each group appreciating tribal land, history, and strengths.

Focus group participants (see Figure 1) were mostly female (86%), identified as Native American (71%), and were roughly evenly distributed by age group. One-fifth identified as White (21%) and 14% identified as Hispanic ethnicity.

Figure 1 Background of Focus Group Participants from McKinley County (14 people)
Includes gender, age group, race, and ethnicity



Town hall attendees (see Figure 2) included a diverse mix of 15 organizations that provide services in McKinley County. They represented various sectors. Most people at the Town Hall worked in school or education settings or health or behavioral health care, representing 4 organizations each. Another 3 participants worked in child care and 2 in food services. One individual indicated working in another non-profit setting. McKinley County participants in Town Halls were passionate about their community, expressing many strengths and challenges to the service array, and the experiences of community residents.

Figure 2 Participant Organizations from Town Hall in McKinley County (22 people, 15 organizations)

PERSPECTIVE POINTS FROM MCKINLEY COUNTY

This section reflects key themes from the focus groups, highlighting the challenges faced by residents of McKinley County.

Distance to Services. Many McKinley County residents expressed concerns about being able to access services, with some needing to travel more than 30 miles in one direction to reach a service. A lack of public transportation and infrastructure challenges have contributed to this. People often need to rely on a friend or a family member with a car to get around. Those who could not access a car reported that they often had to cancel appointments. These challenges were especially true of appointments outside the county.

“OUTSIDE OF TOWN A STUDENT MAY LIVE 10 MILES FROM THE NEAREST SCHOOL. IF THEIR PARENTS ARE AT WORK, THEY CAN’T ACCESS THE FOOD. WE HAVE TO DO BETTER.”
— McKinley Provider

Community members also reported challenges relating to bad weather. Snow or rain prevents residents from getting to work or school if the roads they use are not paved and if the weather is bad, school buses don’t run. When able, many residents travel on foot to reach their destination, but safety concerns make this challenging as well. Residents reported a lack of bike paths and poor-quality sidewalks as a barrier to non-motor travel. Residents raised concerns about feeling unsafe near roadways where they worry about being kidnapped or harmed. During summer breaks, children who live miles away from the school miss out on free meals because they are unable to get there without a ride. The lack of transportation in McKinley County is a major barrier to services, impacting children and families.

Lack of Resources: Residents and providers both reported a lack of resources across all sectors as a significant challenge within the community. There is a lack of available housing units for those that need them leaving people in desperate need on a waitlist for 2 years or more. There are few medical and behavioral health providers - residents reported waiting 6 months or more for an appointment. Only a few walk-in appointments are available for medical and dental appointments each day and require people to arrive at the clinic hours before it opens in hopes of getting a spot. Providers reported few childcare options for children under 3 and some residents shared that they had to quit their jobs to stay home and care for their children. Many providers reported challenges with getting enough food to food-service programs to meet the needs of the community. The need for support services in McKinley County is significantly greater than their ability to provide them and providers stressed a need for more resources.

“IT’S HARD BECAUSE I HAVE TWO AND ONE ON THE WAY, I HAD TO QUIT MY JOB IN ORDER TO TAKE CARE OF MY KIDS.”
—McKinley Resident

“THEY’RE SCARED OF ALL KINDS OF DOCTORS COMING IN AND THEY’LL BE SITTING THERE LIKE WHO’S THIS NOW? THEY DON’T WANNA GO TO THE HOSPITAL NO MORE BECAUSE THEY THINK THE OTHER ONE IS JUST GONNA USE THEM FOR EXPENSES.”

—McKinley Resident

Trust: Residents in McKinley County reported a profound lack of trust in various systems that provide support services. These concerns were particularly prevalent with medical and behavioral health services and childcare. Residents reported finding it difficult to trust medical staff due to high turnover which results in the staff being unfamiliar with their case. Residents felt as if they had to explain their medical history every time they went to the doctor because they were always seeing someone new. Residents also expressed concerns about staff having different cultural or ethnic backgrounds than their patients. This contributed to residents feeling uncomfortable sharing their symptoms with their care team and in some cases prevented them from seeking care at

all. Another concern voiced among residents was that healthcare providers were requiring multiple appointments or providing certain treatment options for the purpose of getting more money from patients. As a result, many residents reported a lack of trust in their treatment plans and their providers. A lack of trust was noted about childcare as well. Residents shared that they felt uncomfortable leaving their children with childcare providers due to previous negative experiences. They worried that their child would be mistreated or that the provider would leave the child unattended. Many McKinley County residents also shared concerns about applying for childcare assistance through CYFD. They felt that when they reached out for help, rather than addressing their concerns, staff used their concerns to build a case against them. They worried that reaching out for help might cause them to lose custody of their children. Some residents felt that when dealing with CYFD, everything they did was scrutinized. This lack of trust led many residents to rely on family to watch their children.

“IF YOU DO SOMETHING WRONG, THAT YOU WANTED THEM [CYFD] TO HELP YOU WITH, THEY TURN AROUND AND USE THAT AGAINST YOU, SO PEOPLE ARE SCARED TO GO THROUGH THAT”

—McKinley Resident

COMMUNITY-IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES WITH SERVICES

This section combines insights from both residents and service providers, outlining experiences with delivering or accessing vital services across sectors.

Food Services: McKinley County has a significant number of programs to supply the community with food including food pantries, free meals programs for children, and community gardens. Many residents utilize these services because while they expressed receiving food stamps, the amount is notably insufficient. Some residents reported receiving as little as \$20 to \$30 per month from the supplemental nutritional assistance program and others reported being turned away entirely. Many who receive a small amount from food stamps wondered if going through the reapplication process is worth the effort. Residents felt unable to wear jewelry or bring a friend with when applying for food stamps, fearing this might be seen as signs of extra income and make them ineligible. Some residents reported that the application process was long and that they felt uncomfortable going into the office because they felt judged. Many residents reported utilizing the food pantries, which do not have as strict of eligibility criteria, and noted that they often had fresh fruits and vegetables. Providers shared that due to budget cuts, the food pantry has decreased services from twice a month to once a month. Now families receive one box of food from the food pantry each month. On the weeks when residents do not receive a box of food, they can still access fruits and vegetables from food pantries. Residents who received food boxes felt that they did not last the whole month because of how quickly the food expired. Many residents shared that they were often unable to make it to the food pantry due to limited hours. They shared that they would like to go on their lunch breaks or after work, but the pantry is closed during those times. The food pantry is only open a few days a week and closes early because it runs out of food. Many residents rely on friends and family for a ride to the food pantry due to the distance from their homes.

Providers in Town Halls shared that in addition to food pantries, there are multiple food distribution programs through the schools. These include free meals and a backpack program that provides canned food to families. There has also been an effort to create community gardens at the schools. Although the providers indicated that these gardens would be beneficial to the community, they shared that it was a struggle to find people to maintain them. Teachers expressed interest in supporting community gardens, but due to high turnover, the teachers often did not stay long enough to maintain the gardens. As a result, the gardens perished over the summer. Providers feel that with someone to maintain the gardens, they could be of great benefit to the community.

Transportation: Due to the large geographical area of McKinley County, transportation was brought up as a particular concern by both residents and providers. When able, many members of the community utilized public transportation. Residents shared that although it was helpful to take the bus, they often were unable to access it. Both residents and providers shared that the public transportation had limited hours and did not run on weekends. When the bus was running, it was often late or inconsistent and did not wait very long at each stop. Existing public transportation was also expressed as limited to the city and not going to rural areas. Providers shared that bus stops are too far apart and are often located in unsafe areas. Residents also felt that the cost for public transportation, \$2 for the bus and \$35 for the train, was too high and prevented them from utilizing it. Although most households in McKinley County have a car, the car is often shared by multiple people. Residents shared that travel is difficult without a car and if they cannot get a ride, they are not able to get to work, school, or appointments. Those that do have a car expressed challenges maintaining it due to the cost of repairs being very expensive. Residents who did not have a car relied on hitchhiking or walking, both which made them feel unsafe. Residents expressed concerns about the quality of roads and sidewalks, mentioning that they were uneven or had large potholes. Providers shared that dirt roads could be a barrier to travel, especially in winter weather. This was particularly true for school buses, which could not travel in bad weather leading to school closures. Additionally, providers noted that school bus stops could be as far as 20 miles from a child's house.

Housing: There is a clear and urgent need for more housing in McKinley County. Many residents and providers reported waiting years for housing due to limited rental options. Families on the waitlist reported having to meet high expectations or risk being removed from the list. Some work is being done to address housing needs by turning an existing hotel building into rental units. Providers reported that rental prices were higher than the fair market rate and residents noted that rent continues to increase. Home ownership is also a challenge for many residents of McKinley County. Residents shared that mortgage rates are high and the loans they qualify for are too low to purchase a home in the area. When affordable homes do become available, they are often bought by people who make more than 3 times the monthly payment, leaving those who make less without affordable options. As a result, some residents choose to build their own homes.

Homeowners face challenges of their own. Residents who own their homes reported having to make a lot of repairs, having very limited space, and either not having certain utilities or struggling to afford them. Providers shared that many people do not have running water. Residents expressed concerns about the lack of protection from getting their utilities shut off. They also shared that many people do not have cell service or internet in their homes. For those experiencing homelessness, the options for shelters are extremely limited. Some residents reported spending \$20 per night to stay at a shelter, others said that the detox center functioned as a shelter, costing \$2 to \$3 per night. Since these were the only shelters available, some people would break their sobriety just to have a place to sleep for the night.

Child Care: Families in McKinley County reported a lack of childcare facilities particularly for children under the age of 3 and for children with disabilities. The existing programs were reported to have a limited number of available spots. Providers shared that the lack of options was due to especially high expectations of providers, including home daycare providers, to meet licensure requirements, as well as a lack of funding. Residents who were unable to find care for their children relied on family or needed to quit their jobs to care for them themselves. Families that were able to access childcare noted that the cost was high even for part time care. Some residents were fearful of reaching out for childcare assistance because they worried it might lead to loss of custody. Many residents reported a lack of trust for childcare providers. This was particularly true if the providers were young; residents noted that many providers were teenagers or young adults. Residents worried about the safety of their children as a result of previous negative experiences.

“MY DAUGHTER QUALIFIES FOR NO ASSISTANCE WITH CHILDCARE, SHE PAYS \$175 FOR 2 DAYS OF CARE.”

—McKinley Resident

Medical & Dental: McKinley County has various options for medical care which many residents feel is of high quality. This was especially true of Indian Health Services. However, a major barrier to accessing medical and dental services is wait times. Both residents and providers shared that wait times could be 6 months or more for non-specialized care. Even if their need was urgent, they still had to wait weeks to be seen. Although walk-in appointments are available, they are extremely limited, usually only 2 or 3 per day. To get a walk-in appointment residents reported arriving at the clinic hours before it opened and having to try for a few days to get in. Residents also visit multiple locations to try to get in sooner. Many residents ended up seeking care outside the county because they felt it was easier to get an appointment. A lack of specialized care led many residents to seek care in other counties or neighboring states. Many people struggled to afford the significant travel required, and some couldn't find a ride at all. For residents traveling out of state, insurance would not cover travel beyond a certain distance and even if they made it to their appointment, insurance might not cover out of state care. Residents also traveled to Albuquerque for care only to find that the care there was not covered by insurance either. Providers reported that there was no ground travel out of Gallup. This means that people have had to drive themselves to other locations even during emergencies. Residents shared that there was no transportation to return home after being discharged, meaning that people had to walk home from the hospital.

Both residents and providers expressed major concerns about the lack of trust in medical professionals that led to many choosing not to receive care. Many residents felt that their doctors were using them to make more money by requiring multiple appointments or telling them they needed expensive procedures. Others felt that medical care providers did not take their race or culture into account when prescribing medication. Some residents preferred and trusted traditional practices to treat illness and alleviate pain. Having medical providers from different cultural or racial backgrounds made residents wary of sharing their symptoms and in some cases led to them opting to not seek care at all. Residents also felt that they could not build trust with their care providers due to high turnover among staff. Residents who had the same doctor for many years felt that they had a very trusting relationship with them and in turn felt that they received excellent care.

Mental Health: Residents of McKinley County reported having access to mental health care for substance use and general needs through the hospitals. Providers felt that people were aware of services and encouraged to seek them out. Much like with medical care, wait times were long, often 6 months or longer and providers expressed concerns about the lack of follow-up care. Additionally, residents felt that there was a shortage of providers with the same background as them and not feeling comfortable talking about their mental health with someone from a different background, as they felt they could not truly understand their concerns. Some residents felt that stigma around mental health had lessened, while others felt it was still a barrier to care.

Although both residents and providers noted needs for specialized care were high, there are few options in McKinley County, particularly for children and adolescents. Providers felt this contributed to people choosing not to seek out care. Residents who chose to seek out care often had to travel to Arizona, some as far as Phoenix, to receive care. Others had to rely on telehealth, which they felt was not as effective. Providers stressed the need to focus on the underlying causes of mental health issues.

COMMUNITY GENERATED IDEAS

This section presents a summary of potential ideas to enhance or improve several sectors based on suggestions from both focus group participants and providers to strengthen services in the community.

Food Services

Enhance Existing Programs:

- Involve the community in caring for school gardens especially during the summer.
- Advocate for expansions to SNAP eligibility and for increases in the dollar amount provided to residents.

Increase Access to Services:

- Increase service hours for food pantries.
- Orient availability to family and work schedules, such as having options for evening or lunchtime hours.

Transportation Services

Improving Access to Transportation:

- Expand hours and provide transportation services 7 days a week.
- Expand access by adding bus stops and routes in rural areas.

Enhancing Safety and Utilization:

- Build more pedestrian bridges over the railway so that people can access them more easily.
- Provide shelters against inclement weather at bus stops and near pedestrian bridges.

Increase Options for Shared Rides:

- Create a carpool service for sharing trips and splitting gas costs.
- Offer transportation at senior centers for medical appointments and access to services.
- Provide vans at central locations for residents to travel to areas outside of public transit routes.

Housing

Improve Existing Infrastructure:

- Offer assistance to property owners for renovations in exchange for them offering affordable rental prices.
- Revitalize existing structures, such as old buildings or foreclosed properties, to create more affordable housing options.

Support Affordable Housing:

- Have an income cap for affordable homes to ensure that they go to those who need them.

Child Care Services

Improving Access, Communication and Implementation:

- Encourage workplaces to offer in-house childcare to their employees through employer incentives.
- Expand after-school program hours for parents that work late.

Medical and Dental

Workforce Shortages & Retention:

- Help to reduce costs of malpractice insurance.
- Create a system where nurses and medical students live for free in exchange for helping the community.
- Train more community health workers.
- Allow for license reciprocity so that doctors licensed in neighboring states could practice in New Mexico.

Access to Services

- Create mobile medical clinics that travel to rural areas.
- Train community outreach workers to check in on people and to serve as a go-between for community members and medical providers.
- Provide interpreters and cultural liaisons for elders during doctor's visits so they feel more comfortable voicing their symptoms and concerns.

Mental Health

Workforce & Training

- Provide mass trainings for community members to become mental health first aid workers who can step in if they see someone having a mental health crisis.
- Have mental health support workers respond to calls relating to mental health crisis to alleviate the burden on police and first responders.

Access to Services

- Include outpatient observations at community centers to help ensure patients are continuing with treatment and accessing follow-up care.
- Provide more crisis centers with licensed counselors on-site.

Other Sectors & Services

- **Increase trust in services and systems:** Participants reported feeling afraid of accessing services due to a lack of trust for service providers. They stressed a need for providers that are knowledgeable about their culture and beliefs. They also expressed concerns about feeling judged for accessing services.
- **Increase Community Support Workforce:** There was a call for mass training of community support workers across multiple sectors including medical and behavioral health as well as for family supports.

IDENTIFIED INTEGRATION NEEDS ACROSS ALL SERVICES

This section summarizes common themes that cut across all service areas, including advocacy, ease of access, and culturally tailored supports.

Advocacy: Participants felt that their communities had little government support and that their needs are not adequately represented. They emphasized a need for more advocacy for changes and supports in the community.

Ease of Access: Participants stressed the need for more service locations, particularly in rural areas, and more options for walk-in appointments.

Culturally Tailored Supports: Participants stressed the importance of having service providers from the same cultural and ethnic backgrounds as their own. They also noted the importance of having interpreters and culturally educated providers.

"WE HAVE ELDERS THAT DON'T FEEL COMFORTABLE SAYING THEIR SYMPTOMS TO THE DOCTOR BECAUSE THEY DON'T FEEL COMFORTABLE OF THEIR CULTURAL DIFFERENCES."

– McKinley Resident

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