



Informing a New Mexico Child and Family Services System Blueprint

Voices from Taos

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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.

In Taos County, families and service providers—including members of Taos Pueblo—shared their experiences using or providing services. Families and service providers in six counties are sharing their stories about using or providing services. This document shares the results of the Taos County Town Hall (51 participants), and two focus groups held with members of Taos Pueblo (24 participants).

The Town Hall and Focus Groups were audio recorded and analyzed by Chapin Hall.

Focus group participants (see Figure 1) were individuals who could speak to accessing at least one of the following services: housing assistance, public transportation, food assistance, medical and dental care, behavioral healthcare, and child care. Their experiences reflect both life within the Pueblo and the broader Taos County area where some community members live, work, or seek services. Focus group participants, all identifying as Native American, included 16 women and 9 men, with most between the ages of 25 and 44 or over 65. Considering the unique perspective of the focus group participants, additional information has been included in this report to highlight access issues specific to the Tribal Nation of Taos. This report is not intended for public distribution outside of the Pueblo and is shared here for your consideration. Additionally, only suggestions relevant to Taos and voiced by participating community members were embedded within the narrative.

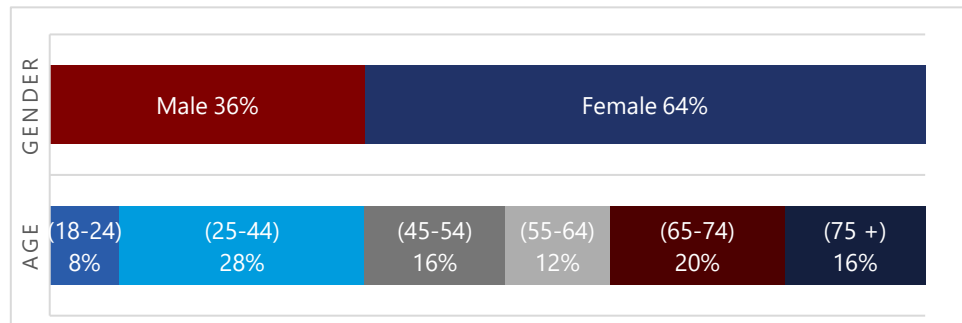


Figure 1 Background of Focus Group Participants from Taos Pueblo (25 Members)
Includes gender and age group. All participants identified as Native American (not shown here).

Town Hall attendees (see Figure 2) included a diverse mix of 31 organizations that provide services in Taos County. Most people at the

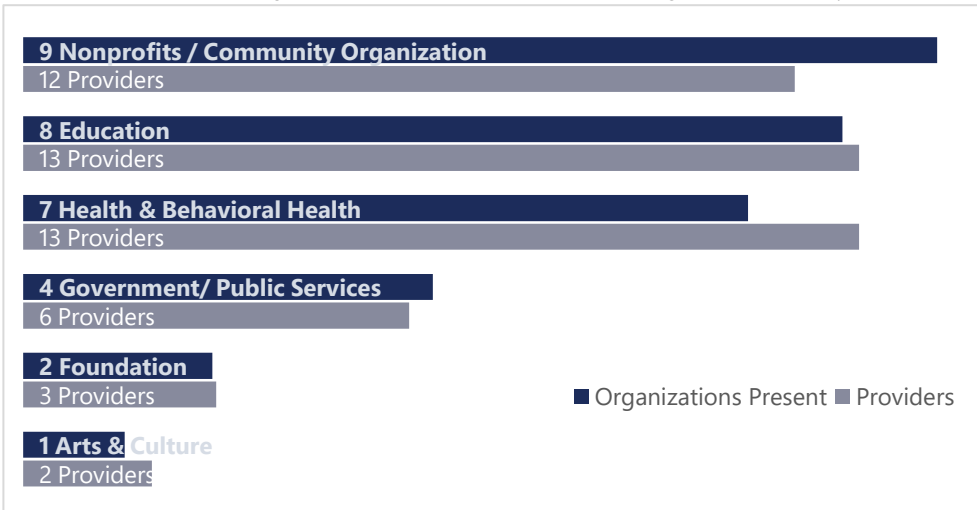


Figure 2 Town Hall Provider Attendees by Sector in Taos County
Shows the number and percentage of individuals representing several sectors. A total of 49 provider staff were present from 31 different organizations.

Town Hall worked in schools or education settings (about 26%), health or mental health (23%), or non-profit organizations or community agencies (29%). Others came from government (13%), foundations (6%), and the arts & culture sector (3%). Town Hall participants represented a range of sectors, including 13 from education, 13 from health and behavioral health, and 12 from nonprofit and community-based organizations. Additional representation included 6 individuals from government and public services, 3 from foundations, and 2 from the arts and culture sector. Also in attendance were 2 residents, not counted among providers.

PERSPECTIVE POINTS FROM TAOS PUEBLO

This section reflects key themes from the focus groups, highlighting the challenges faced by the people of Taos Pueblo.

“SO, WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT WHAT PROPERTY VALUES ARE IN RELATIONSHIP TO OUR WAY OF LIFE, WHICH IS CENTERED ON THE LAND. RIGHT? CENTERED ON HUMILITY. CENTERED ON, YOU KNOW, SURVIVABILITY... WE'RE PRETTY HUMBLE PEOPLE... IT BECOMES BEING SUBSERVIENT TO THE TOURIST CLASS.”

—Focus Group Participant

Cost of Living Impacts. The high cost of living in Taos affects food access, healthcare, housing, employment, and mental health. Many residents struggle to afford nutritious food, often relying on food banks or hunting to get by. Healthcare is also a financial burden, forcing some to choose between medical appointments and basic needs. Housing affordability remains a major concern, driven by rising property values, tourism, and low wages. Some said local grocery stores feel like a luxury, with prices out of reach for many. Wages often fail to keep pace with rising costs, and available jobs rarely cover basic expenses. Participants expressed how the financial strain contributes to stress and anxiety, yet mental health care remains hard to access and is still stigmatized, making it difficult for some to seek support. Additionally, the combination of high costs, low wages, and limited career opportunities make it hard to retain skilled workers in Taos. As one participant shared, community members want to stay rooted in their traditions and

families, but the lack of sustainable employment makes it nearly impossible to remain in the area long-term.

Gaps in Local Services: Overall, systems were described as fragmented or “broken,” under-resourced, and lacking culturally responsive staff. Taos residents consistently described how staffing shortages and limited local services create barriers to meeting basic health and wellness needs.

Frequent turnover among providers, like doctors, dentists, and behavioral health professionals, disrupts continuity of care, and some services are understaffed or unavailable altogether. Participants shared that elders remain on long waiting lists for in-home care, and drivers for medical or community transport are too few to meet demand. Low wages and slow hiring processes make it hard to retain qualified staff, especially when other regions offer better pay. Some existing services are seen as overburdened and inadequate, with residents often traveling out of town for care

Taos Youth. Youth were seen as both vulnerable and vital to the community’s future, and residents voiced the need for support for young people now, so they don’t face struggles in the future. There were concerns about limited services, especially in mental health, education, and transportation. Some youth struggle to get to school, and a lack of recreational or cultural programming leaves them without structured support. At the same time, participants expressed hope in efforts to teach traditional ways and pass down cultural values.

Impacts of Substance Abuse & Addiction: The Pueblo spoke about cycles of trauma and the need for accessible recovery support in Taos, where trauma-related behaviors often go misunderstood or unsupported. Many shared how intergenerational and Native Peoples historical trauma affects mental health, leading to substance use and challenges with parenting. Some grandparents are raising children while their adult children struggle with untreated mental illness or addiction. Available recovery spaces were praised for offering connection and support beyond substance use, particularly for those with mental health challenges. Still, participants noted gaps in staffing, cultural relevance, and confidentiality, and shared that stigma often discourages people from seeking help. There was a clear call for trauma-informed, community-rooted services that address both substances use and the deeper pain beneath it.

“IT’S ALL ABOUT JUST SEEING WHAT PEOPLE NEED TO UNDERSTAND— THAT MENTAL HEALTH IS JUST AS DANGEROUS AS ADDICTION. PEOPLE LOSE THEIR LIVES TO BOTH.”

—Focus Group Participant

Community/Informal Support: Community support plays a vital role in Taos, especially where formal systems fall short. Many residents described strong informal networks—neighbors, friends, and extended family members who offer rides, check in on elders, and help with day-to-day needs. This is particularly important for those without transportation or stable access to services. Within the Pueblo, cultural traditions

and intergenerational bonds further strengthen this sense of connection. However, despite these strong personal relationships, participants noted a lack of formal infrastructure to support caregiving, youth, mental health, and elder services.

“THE LAST I CHECKED FOR AN AFFORDABLE RENTAL WITHIN TAOS COUNTY, -- THE PRICE WAS EQUIVALENT TO A FLAT IN MANHATTAN”

—Focus Group Participant

Lack of Transparency or Communication: Participants expressed wanting to know more about developments, planning and decision making among the local Tribal government. There was uncertainty and frustration about the status of housing development or the decision-making process. They felt there is a lack of communication and participation in community meetings about housing policies,

construction, or land use planning. Several comments expressed a sense of not knowing what's happening—that applications disappear, money is reallocated, or decisions are made without community input. Some expressed wanting a Taos Pueblo Newsletter to be informed or regular meeting circles where they can feel safe to discuss important issues in the community.

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON WITH THAT HOUSING... IF THEY STILL BUILD THEM OR IF IT'S A PROBLEM TO WHERE THEY BUILD THEM OR I DON'T KNOW."

— Focus Group Participant

Sovereignty and Self-Sufficiency: Community members described creative, resourceful approaches to daily life that reflect both cultural values and practical needs. Stories pointed to a broader theme of self-sufficiency rooted in traditional knowledge and a deep connection to the land. For example, some described how they have a commitment to living in harmony

with natural resources. While such systems can be costly to implement, participants noted they offer long-term sustainability and independence. Many emphasized a return to self-sufficiency through farming, hunting, and traditional food practices—describing a desire to reduce dependence on outside systems. Others saw potential in reviving community farming: *"We could easily have something going, so we're not running into town for everything we need."*

Participants noted a gap in sustaining sovereignty and tradition without access to education and sustainable work. Participants shared that passing down traditional skills and creating local jobs based on those skills is very important as one shared, *"For a lot of the men here at the Pueblo, sticking to our traditions and practicing those traditions is a very important part of our lives."* In the past, programs helped Tribal members learn trades like plumbing, construction, and caring for traditional homes. Today, those programs are mostly gone. Participants said that using traditional skills and ways of doing things can help solve problems today and also keep Pueblo traditions alive. Nevertheless, participants shared concerns about barriers to maintaining this vision. The housing department now has only two workers, and they are not certified. It is hard to find training for these jobs, and local work often does not pay well. This makes it difficult for young people to stay and help their community. Even for those who pursue higher education, returning home can be challenging. One participant explained:

"WHAT ENDS UP HAPPENING IS SOME OF THEM DO. BUT WHEN THEY COME BACK, THERE'S NO JOBS AVAILABLE. THERE'S NO COMPETITIVE WAGES FOR THESE PEOPLE TO REMAIN HERE AND MAKE THE MONEY THAT THEY DESERVE. BUT, YOU KNOW, WHEN YOU HAVE INDIVIDUALS THAT JUST WANT TO LEARN A TRADE AND HELP THE PEOPLE AND LIVE HERE AND BE ABLE TO PRACTICE OUR TRADITIONAL WAYS AND YET STILL EARN AN INCOME THAT YOU'RE ABLE TO SURVIVE WITH, YOU KNOW, THERE'S, THERE'S PEOPLE LIKE THAT STILL HERE. AND RIGHT NOW, I THINK, YOU KNOW, THOSE ARE INDIVIDUALS THAT HOUSING COULD REALLY BE IN NEED OF..."

COMMUNITY-IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES WITH SERVICES

This section shares insights from Focus Group participants and Town Hall providers on access and delivery of six services.

Food Services: Service Providers and residents alike voiced frustration with high food prices and limited selection in local stores. Pueblo residents noted the lack of nearby affordable grocery stores, often having to travel long distances (sometimes as far as Santa Fe) for fresher and more affordable options, but without reliable transportation, this becomes a major barrier. Pueblo residents emphasized how dependence on grocery stores has weakened food sovereignty. *"We have a broken system when it comes to food sovereignty. We should be able to grow our own food, but we've been robbed of that opportunity,"* one person said. Others recalled that hunting once played a central role in sustaining families: *"My father and brothers hunted a lot. We grew up on that, but now we're dependent on grocery stores."*

Food access is also shaped by strict income eligibility rules. Some residents earn just over the threshold for assistance but still struggle to meet basic needs. As one explained, *"We don't [qualify for assistance]—we're right over the threshold of SNAP. So, we're still poor."* Since SNAP eligibility is based on both income and household composition, some receive limited benefits despite supporting large, multigenerational households. One person shared that they receive \$200 in SNAP benefits but are expected to feed their siblings and a parent. Participants noted that food prices have increased while SNAP benefits have stayed the same making it harder to afford necessities, *"I spent my whole SNAP in one trip. I filled up one cart, and that was my whole EBT."* Others described how the application process itself is difficult to navigate. Some participants described confusing applications, long wait times, and unhelpful responses when trying to correct errors. One gave up trying to report a fraudulent claim and chose to pay for food out-of-pocket instead.

Food pantries and other assistance programs exist, but residents and providers noted gaps. Many reported expired or unhealthy items limited fresh food, and a lack of staples like meat. Participants stressed that nutritious, culturally appropriate food is hard to access, making it difficult to maintain a healthy diet—especially for those with chronic conditions. As one resident shared, *"A lot of people in our community are diabetic, so we need better food options."* Others noted that most pantry offerings are shelf-stable and lack the variety needed for balanced meals. Limited hours, unclear communication, and restrictive policies further reduce access, particularly for those in the Pueblo or without reliable transportation, especially for Elders in the community. *"I'm lucky enough that I can still drive. A lot of our community does not,"* one member shared. While some benefit from the Senior Center Lunch Program or commodity foods, others expressed frustration about the limited support from tribal or local agencies and the need to rely heavily on informal networks, like family or neighbors to reach stores or food distribution sites.

Transportation: A major transportation barrier in Taos is that many residents lack access to a personal vehicle, making everyday tasks like getting groceries, commuting, or attending medical appointments difficult. While gas cards and ride programs offer some support, they don't help those without a car or someone to drive them. Many rely on friends or family for rides, which can be unreliable—especially for elders, homebound individuals, and youth. Youth, specifically, can face long walks from bus stops, have missed school or even dropped out due to lack of transportation.

Public transportation is limited in both routes and hours. The local bus system doesn't align well with work schedules, has long wait times, lacks weekend service, and often runs infrequently. Some areas, like Penasco and Carson Estates, have no direct service at all. Even with increased demand, driver shortages—driven by low wages and better pay elsewhere—make expansion difficult. Both residents and providers expressed frustration with the lack of investment in transit, especially for rural and medical access. A rideshare service, Trip Karma, was ultimately halted due to regulatory and insurance barriers described as outdated for rural communities. Participants also noted that Medicaid transportation has declined since COVID, with reimbursement rates too low to sustain services.

While transportation is an issue throughout Taos County, residents of Taos Pueblo face greater limitations. There are no taxis, ride-share services, or grocery stores within the Pueblo, forcing residents to travel into town for basic needs. This is particularly difficult for those without a car, as public transportation options are extremely limited. Although the Tribe operates a transportation division, it is primarily focused on out-of-town trips for medical appointments rather than everyday use. Some stated that they would like to see the Pueblo expand its transportation services to help with grocery shopping, work commutes, and other daily activities. However, a major barrier to improving the system is the shortage of available drivers. The hiring process within the Pueblo takes a long time, and the pay is lower than in state jobs, making it difficult to attract or retain workers.

Housing: There is a clear and urgent need for more housing in Taos, especially for younger community members, families, and those without stable homes. Many residents described housing as "too expensive," with homeownership feeling like a "dream." Multigenerational living is common due to limited housing, cultural values, and economic necessity. While some appreciate these arrangements, others described them as crowded, with younger family members hoping to have homes of their own. Rental prices have skyrocketed—one participant cited paying "\$2,500 a month for a one-bedroom, one-bath." Residents linked rising costs to tourism, out-of-state retirees, second-home buyers, and wage differences compared to locals. Short-term rentals like Airbnb's were also seen as reducing the already limited housing supply. One participant estimated that "half to a third of the units that already exist are vacant at any given time," but remain inaccessible to local families. Affordable rentals are often in less desirable areas or too far from Taos Pueblo. Providers at the Town Hall echoed these concerns, emphasizing that the housing shortage is a major barrier to recruiting and retaining essential workers. As one provider put it: *"It's not that people don't want to come. It all goes back to housing. If you don't have a place to live, you can't live here."* Even when professionals are willing to relocate, many struggle to find housing for themselves and their families, raising concerns about long-term staffing shortages in healthcare and education.

Beyond affordability, housing quality and access are also challenges. Many landlords don't accept housing vouchers, and those who do often offer "substandard" or unsafe units. Residents relying on assistance face slow, confusing processes—heightened by the fact that the local voucher program is administered from Socorro, far from Taos. Many residents struggle to get answers or complete paperwork, further complicating their ability to access housing aid. One resident shared they waited months to find housing; others noted some programs only offer help once or twice a year. While nonprofits provide some support, residents and providers agreed existing resources fall short of the community's needs.

While rising property values in Taos are an economic concern, they also threaten the Pueblo's traditional way of life, which is deeply rooted in ancestral land. In Taos Pueblo, housing access remains a persistent challenge. Many young Tribal members live with extended family due to limited options, and some who own land lack the funding to build or maintain homes. Although more housing is needed, cultural traditions and unclear land policies can limit where and how development occurs. The community values the preservation of sacred lands and traditional ways, but they also recognize these restrictions can limit where and how housing can be developed. Some community members perceive that the Pueblo could do more to address housing needs but is constrained by traditional governance or slow bureaucratic processes. Some pieces of land sit unused—either because they are unclaimed or owned by people who no longer live in the area—which makes it harder for local residents to access land for housing.

Housing quality and infrastructure issues are widespread, especially in the Pueblo and rural areas. Long wait times for repairs, a shortage of certified workers, and minimal support from housing authorities were common concerns. For example, the Pueblo has relied on a single plumber (who recently became ill) further delaying services. The housing department currently operates with just two uncertified staff, and the loss of local trade programs limits both repairs and job opportunities. Some residents have waited years for essential modifications like ADA compliance, with requests dating back to 2017. Access to basic infrastructure like water and sewer services was also raised as an ongoing challenge. Participants noted that some homes still lack running water or sewer hookups, especially in more remote areas. Others mentioned failing septic systems and unreliable water pressure, with assistance slow or unavailable.

Child Care: Finding childcare in Taos County is difficult due to limited availability, high costs, and long waitlists—sometimes up to two years. Even with support from programs like CYFD Child Care Assistance and Head Start, many families still can't access or afford care, especially in rural areas. This lack of reliable options forces some parents to reduce work hours or depend on family members. Some parents also worry about the safety and quality of available childcare providers. Families with children who have special needs, such as autism, face even greater barriers, often having to travel outside the county to find appropriate care.

Local providers and community leaders confirmed these challenges, noting that even if more childcare centers were built, there wouldn't be enough qualified staff to run them. Low wages and limited benefits are pushing qualified early childhood professionals out of the field. Without stronger state investment, counties like Taos lack the resources to expand services. Fewer after-school and summer programs than in years past further limit options for working families.

Childcare in Taos Pueblo is even harder to find. There are very few programs, so many parents rely on grandparents or older kids to help. Some families use tribal programs like Tiwa Babies (home visiting), or Head Start, but they are not enough for everyone. Unlike families outside the Pueblo, tribal families do not always qualify for state childcare help, and there are no daycare centers in the Pueblo. Parents who have children with special needs often have to find help outside the Pueblo, like at Ranchos Elementary. Many people believe the Tribal government should provide more childcare options, but right now, there is no clear plan.

Medical & Dental: Accessing healthcare in Taos is difficult due to a shortage of providers, high costs, long wait times, and limited specialty services. Residents frequently struggle to find and keep a primary care provider, as high turnover disrupts continuity of care. Many shared the frustration of building trust with a doctor, only to start over when they leave. Older adults, in particular, report feeling dismissed, rushed, or disrespected, and cited experiences like overprescribing or having to repeat their medical history as reasons for losing trust in the system.

The shortage of providers has led to waitlists stretching up to three years, especially for Medicaid patients. Dental care is also hard to access, with residents describing a cycle of delays and referrals between providers, often without clear answers or follow-through due to poor coordination.. Efforts to recruit and retain healthcare workers are hampered by low salaries, a lack of affordable housing, and underperforming pipeline programs. Providers emphasized how Taos's housing shortage, including resistance to a workforce housing initiative, affects staffing issues. Relocation is more complicated when providers' families need access to employment or education opportunities.

Without consistent care, many residents forgo preventive services and rely on emergency rooms, straining the system further. Specialty care is even more limited. While Holy Cross Hospital offers some services, patients are often referred out of town, adding logistical and financial burdens. Providers confirmed these gaps, noting frequent cancellations or virtual-only appointments at urgent care, which push more people toward ER use.

With many services outside of Taos, many residents depend on finding transportation to reach medical appointments. Long-distance travel to specialists in Santa Fe or Albuquerque is costly and difficult, particularly for residents without reliable vehicles. Missed or rescheduled appointments can delay care by months, and medical flights often lack return transportation, leaving residents to pay for expensive trips home.

The cost of healthcare is another major barrier. Some residents must choose between medical appointments and necessities like food. Even those with insurance struggle, as not all providers accept Medicaid or Medicare. Specialty procedures often require hundreds of dollars in out-of-pocket costs, making access even harder for lower-income individuals. Providers cited New Mexico's Medicaid reimbursement rates—among the lowest in the country—as a major reason for limited provider participation, making it hard for clinics to stay financially viable and further reducing access for the community.

Tribal members in Taos Pueblo rely on Indian Health Services (IHS) for medical and dental care, but many described it as unstable and under-resourced. Staff turnover is a major concern—participants noted the local IHS facility has had seven different CEOs in five years. They felt this inconsistency leads to frequent changes in policies, service availability, and overall quality of care. Some residents reported transferring their medical records to IHS in Santa Fe due to inadequate care in Taos. The lack of in-house specialists often forces long-distance travel for treatment. While referrals are available, they can take months to schedule, and travel difficulties often lead to cancellations—pushing patients further down the wait list. The referral process itself is burdensome, requiring lengthy paperwork and delays in approval. Additionally, accessing dental care through IHS is particularly challenging. Many Pueblo residents shared that no local providers accept Medicaid or Medicare, forcing referrals to Santa Fe. Others expressed frustration with the quality of care, citing multiple return visits to correct the same issue.

Historical trauma and cultural barriers further affect access. Some Indigenous residents said it was hard to find providers who understand their cultural background, especially in sensitive areas like reproductive or mental health. A long history of medical mistreatment contributes to deep mistrust, which is complicated by the lack of Indigenous healthcare providers. As a result, patients often feel misunderstood or dismissed during medical visits.

These systemic problems have led many to describe tribal healthcare as a “sinking ship.” Despite their dissatisfaction, most feel they have no better options. Participants stressed the need for greater investment in IHS staffing, improved care coordination, and culturally competent services that reflect and respect Indigenous experiences.

Mental Health: Providers echoed residents' concerns, citing workforce shortages, limited funding, and burdensome state certification requirements that make it difficult to recruit and retain mental health professionals. As a result, many clinicians are overworked and burned out, leading to appointment delays, canceled sessions, and inconsistent care. Even when services are available, provider turnover disrupts continuity. Cost is another major barrier. Residents said they couldn't afford care unless it was free, and providers noted that many rely on Medicaid—which not all clinics accept due to low reimbursement rates. Both groups also pointed to stigma and past negative experiences as barriers to seeking help. In a small community where “everyone knows everyone,” concerns about confidentiality and judgment are common. Others expressed frustration that mental health issues are often ignored by people in the community until they escalate into crises. Some participants shared concerns about expressing their struggles to therapists out of fear that they might be institutionalized or treated differently.

Without adequate early intervention or a crisis stabilization unit system equipped to address mental health needs, especially for those seeking recovery from addiction. Providers and residents shared that individuals often end up in emergency rooms or jail. Both residents and providers emphasized the urgent need for a more robust, continuous, and culturally responsive system of mental health care in Taos.

For Taos Pueblo, mental health services are even more limited. There is a lack of behavioral health professionals who speak their language or understand cultural and historical traumas. Some elders, for example, do not seek help because there are no providers who can communicate effectively with them.

A lack of in-home mental health services for elders was also identified as a gap, with some participants stating that referrals for counseling and behavioral health support are often sent out of town because local options are inadequate.

Many tribal members have had negative experiences with the Indian Health Service (IHS) behavioral health system, either due to the lack of qualified professionals or because of dismissive treatment by providers. Some mentioned that their mental health conditions had been overlooked or misdiagnosed, and that their family members had to travel to Albuquerque or Santa Fe to receive proper care.

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