



THE TAOS NEWS

Best U.S. Weekly Paper- NNA 2007, 2008, 2010
Inland Press Nation's Best Weekly Newspaper 2009

Editorial

At-risk kids are victims of state's behavioral health debacle

The Taos News, 4/21/2016

Three years ago, the state cut off Medicaid funding to 15 New Mexico behavioral health providers. Among them were two that served children and teens in the Taos area.

The state leveled allegations of fraud after a secret audit conducted by an out-of-state firm claimed \$36 million in Medicaid overpayments were made to these agencies.

Without such funding, the providers, including Easter Seals El Mirador and TeamBuilders Counseling in Taos, closed shop. The state's solution was to bring in behavioral health providers from Arizona to take their place. That move disrupted care for people in Taos and across the state. And the recent announcement that one of the Arizona providers is pulling out will likely cause more disruption. To add insult to injury, the state Attorney General's Office has since cleared the 15 providers of any wrongdoing. TeamBuilders was one of the last two absolved earlier this month. Ironically, days before, Agave, the Arizona agency that replaced it, announced it is leaving the state at the end of June.

During the first shakeup, we were critical of the state's approach. If there were indeed problems of fraud, the state Human Services Department failed in its responsibilities to give the behavioral health agencies oversight.

Our biggest concern then was with the children and youth of the Taos area who were served by local providers and their families.

It still is.

The state blundered badly in what can only be described as a political maneuver. And the ones who suffered are among the state's most vulnerable citizens.

Agave Health — a subsidiary of an Arizona-based behavioral health provider — took over for TeamBuilders in 2013. After losing \$4 million in two years, the organization announced it is leaving the state. Its president said the nonprofit couldn't make it financially because the state and insurers would not allow it to serve adults. Agave has 150 young clients in the Taos area.

So, once again, with no agency in place to take over, we ask: What is going to happen to the children it served?

In a front-page story last week, numerous people who work with at-risk youth in the schools, courts and social service agencies expressed their concerns as well.

We have children who cannot learn in a classroom without help. If they go into the courts system, they need psychological assessments and evaluations. Many need prescribed medication.

These local experts also spoke about how "disruptions in service make clients wary of giving that trust, ... causing them to avoid seeking support in the future."

These are kids who need help only behavioral health specialists can provide.

Debate over this issue has largely focused on the complexities of Medicaid funding and the legitimacy of secret audits. Plus there's the political subtext of our Republican governor and Democratic attorney general facing off.

But as leaders and health experts scramble to resolve this latest crisis, we hope any decision puts the clients' needs first.

Copyright (c)2016 The Taos News 4/21/2016

Powered by TECNAVIA