

Jones to champion substance recovery center

Article by Annya Loya, Deming Headlight

State Rep. Jenifer Jones, R-Deming, traveled to Florida last month for a training and tour session of the upcoming Miami Center for Recovery in Miami-Dade County. The center, set to open next year, aims to alleviate the mental health crisis in the Miami-Dade county jail — described in some reports as, in effect, the state’s largest psychiatric institution.

Connie Vigil, president of the Greater Albuquerque business alliance, recruited a team of New Mexico leaders to attend the Miami-Dade tour. Vigil and her organization have been lobbying for similar treatment facilities for almost ten years, she said.

The upcoming center in Miami-Dade helps people considered “high users of acute services” among inmates or detainees at the county jail. Among the services offered, they’ll provide behavioral and primary care as well as legal and social services. Florida Eleventh Judicial District Judge Steve Leifman of Miami says the center will determine how mental health care will be treated within the criminal justice system, the Miami Herald reported.

Jones was the only state legislator who attended the event. She is a member of the legislative Health and Human Services Committee and a former registered nurse.

“I was really inspired by their success and how they’ve put together resources and really helped their community, helped people who are in need, who are addicted, who are seriously mentally ill and caught up in the court system,” Jones said.

Other attendees included Fernando Macias, Doña Ana County manager; state Health Secretary Patrick Allen; Nick Boukas, director of the New Mexico Behavioral Health Services Division; University of New Mexico staff. Vigil is working to gather another group of state representatives and healthcare workforce to tour the Miami-Dade recovery center at a future date.

“We technically have no treatment facilities other than nonprofits. A few hospitals have wings where people can go for temporary treatment,” Vigil said.



State Rep. Jenifer Jones is seen during a meeting with constituents in Deming in April 2023. (Headlight staff photo by Algernon D’Ammassa)

Vigil said that Jones’ involvement in HHSC puts her in a good position to bring the idea of regional treatment centers forward.

Jones, in turn, said she hoped success in Miami-Dade County would inspire New Mexico to create similar programs and facilities, alleviating its own mental health crisis and decreasing recidivism.

One of the HHSC’s priorities is to remediate the behavioral health infrastructure and develop a system for New Mexico, which, according to Jones, is currently nonexistent.

“There’s a way to rehabilitate them and bring them out of their addiction, stabilize their mental illness for them to become a part of society in a productive way,” Jones said.

In New Mexico, 80 percent of individuals released from prison each year have a substance use disorder, mental health condition, or chronic physical health condition, according to the New Mexico Health Department.

The impact of an inadequate healthcare workforce is also one of the main issues when dealing with behavioral health. New Mexico is in need of approximately 10,000 healthcare workers, according to the 2023 Annual Report of the New Mexico Health Care Workforce Committee.

According to Vigil, Las Cruces could potentially be the best place to build a regional treatment center that would attend “cities like Deming and Alamogordo” and the rest of southern New Mexico.

“We’re coming to a point that’s very exciting because there’s a very strong interest by the entire state legislators,” Vigil said.

Alongside her team, Jones said she planned to present an initial proposal later this month in the upcoming HHSC meeting to create a recovery center in New Mexico.

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