

MY VIEW:  
DEBBIE RODELLA

# No one was left to help Victor

Two weeks ago, 16 year-old Victor Villalpando was fatally shot by police in Española.

Victor was a talented gymnast and dancer. He had overcome many challenges not of his own making during his brief journey through life and, at 16, served as an instructor for others. He had just graduated from Moving Arts Española and been accepted into the prestigious New Mexico School for the Arts.

Prior to the shooting, Victor called the police several times, possibly seeking help.

His cries went unheeded.



Rep. Debbie Rodella

Last year, Gov. Susana Martinez shut down more than 90 percent of youth behavioral health services in Rio Arriba County, claiming

Medicaid fraud. Victor's cry for help was never heard because nobody was left to hear it.

State officials assured our community that services wouldn't be interrupted. Only top management would be replaced. The move was deemed necessary because of New Mexico's culture of "egregious fraud." Subsequent investigations have failed to uncover any evidence supporting Medicaid fraud. In fact, Martinez's audit was declared faulty by our state auditor.

Behavioral health providers were laid off and only some rehired. Client files were closed. All outreach ceased.

The new providers from Arizona have taken a year to become partially operational. They still are not integrated into our community. The state of New Mexico operates a 24/7 crisis line staffed by master's-level professional counselors (855-NMCrisis). At the time of the shooting, my community was unaware of its existence.

Had Victor known, he might have called this number instead of summoning police.

This winter, I teamed up with officials from Rio Arriba County who had repeatedly expressed concern about the lack of resources. We worked with the other members of Rio Arriba's legislative delegation and successfully passed an allocation of \$100,000 to SB 313, the state budget. The appropriation had been intended for intensive case management by Rio Arriba County for those at highest risk for overdose, and for preventive training, including crisis intervention and mental health first aid for law enforcement personnel.

Unfortunately, while the governor left the appropriation in her budget, she line-item-vetoed the earmark to Rio Arriba, despite the fact that its overdose death rates far exceed other counties.

Four years ago, there was a state fund for crisis intervention training for police. This fund was zeroed out. While law enforcement personnel now receive active shooter training and other training designed to curb terrorism, nobody teaches police how to de-escalate individuals in crisis. And Gov. Martinez's behavioral health debacle has shut off the flow of services for those who need them.

My community has banded together. I am grateful that the state Behavioral Health Services Division has acted speedily to award an emergency grant of \$12,000 to Rio Arriba County for mental health first-aid workshops for our police.

I now encourage behavioral health services officials and the governor to find a way to reallocate the \$100,000 award that my colleagues and I passed, and to work with Rio Arriba County and my community to prevent new tragedies from befalling our youth.

State Rep. Debbie Rodella represents District 41.