

Rio Arriba Health and Human Services Department

# Steps To A Safer Future for our Youth



## Victor's Call for Help

On June 8, 2014, Española police shot and killed Victor Villalpando, while responding to an apparent unskilled request for help. Victor was a very talented dancer and gymnast. He had recently completed ten years as a student at Moving Arts Española (MAE), a rigorous dance and gymnastics afterschool program, and been accepted into the prestigious New Mexico School for the Arts.

In addition to dancing, Victor was an eloquent speaker. Only weeks prior to his death, he inspired a crowd gathered at the Hunter Center for Arts and Agriculture's Run/Walk/Ride with words of hope and encouragement. At sixteen, Victor had developed MAE's mentorship program, and had already helped many younger MAE students to reach for their own goals.

Like many children in Rio Arriba County, where over 50% of youth are raised by grandparents, Victor had to struggle to overcome challenges he didn't create. His mother suffered from a substance use disorder during pregnancy, and Victor had to overcome addiction to substances at birth. He faced many school challenges as a youngster, and yet discovered the strength within to excel at the arts.

Adolescence is a turbulent time at best. The adolescent brain is not fully developed. When young people struggle with pain caused by growing out of their supportive environment, and facing a bright, but unknown future peopled with an unknown, new community, they are not always equipped to tell themselves to sleep on it. Youth behave impulsively.

Nobody really knows why Victor called 911 on June 8th. It is a tragedy that he cannot answer that question for us. But it seems likely that he called the emergency response number because that is the only number he knew to call for help.

## A Confluence of Poor Policy

Victor's shooting was the result of a confluence of three destructive policy streams impacting our community simultaneously and exacerbating one another's effects: 1) disruption of statewide youth behavioral health services; 2) a change in training patterns for police; and 3) perceived increase in the number of guns on the street, mass shooting incidents and violence directed against police. The impact of each of these policies will be examined separately below.

### *Disintegration of Behavioral Health Services for Youth*

In June of 2013, the Behavioral Health Services Division (BHSD) of the New Mexico Human Services Department announced its intent to withhold Medicaid payments to 15 providers of behavioral health

services after an audit conducted by Public Consulting Group (PCG) uncovered an alleged \$33.8 million in Medicaid overpayments. BHSD formed emergency contracts with seven Arizona firms to take over services in New Mexico in the event that cessation of Medicaid payments should result in severe service disruption.

Two of the accused providers, Easter Seals El Mirador and Teambuilders, provided over 90% of all youth behavioral health services in Rio Arriba. On July 10, 2013, concerned Rio Arriba residents gathered at an unscheduled town hall. They were assured by an official from the New Mexico Behavioral Health Services Division that no disruption of services would occur. The community again expressed its concern to Diana McWilliams, the CEO of the Behavioral Health Purchasing Collaborative at a public Twitter/Multi-Media Town Hall held on August 14. Again the community was assured that no disruption in services had occurred. Alarmed by ongoing public complaints and by apparent disengagement of the Arizona providers in the community, Rio Arriba County officials David Trujillo and Lauren Reichelt, traveled to Santa Fe on October 7, 2013 and again expressed concern about the potential impact of ongoing service disruption, especially to youth. Ms. McWilliams met with the Rio Arriba Community Health Council on October 9, 2013. Mr. Trujillo and other members of the community once again voiced their concern that the severe disruption in behavioral health services was likely to create hardships and result in possibly tragic circumstances if it could not be quickly resolved. In addition, the issue was discussed at a meeting of the Espanola City Council and at several County Commission meetings.

It remains deeply concerning that Valle Del Sol has become engaged in community efforts only within the last few months, while Agave is still largely absent from events aimed at building a stronger community for youth. Very little noticeable outreach has occurred. While BHSD maintains a 24/7 Crisis line staffed by master's level personnel, few in Rio Arriba were aware of it prior to Victor's shooting. It is likely that if Victor had known another number to call for help, he would not have turned to the police, and would have met with a far better outcome.

Rio Arriba is a high needs community due to ongoing epidemic levels of substance abuse. This seriously impacts youth, who often need extra support to overcome challenges they inherited. There is a serious need for outreach to youth who may be in need but not be aware of services. It is imperative that the public knows to call an appropriate number for help. While calls to the police should not result in tragedy, because they are armed law enforcement officers, mistakes have the potential to be immediately life threatening.

#### *Changes in Police Training*

Because the behavioral health service delivery system has never been adequate to meet the need in New Mexico, or frankly, in America, so many calls to respond to behavioral health crises were going to police prior to FY 2012 that BHSD maintained a statewide fund for Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) for law enforcement personnel. RAHHS was contracted through BHSD to coordinate annual CIT workshops for law enforcement. Beginning in July of 2012, this state budget was eliminated (along with most other preventive services), and police were no longer systematically trained to recognize and respond to mental health crises.

Because the same period of time saw a sharp increase in and public awareness of school shootings such as the mass killings at Sandy Hook and in Virginia. In response to this, the federal government has made grants available to communities for Active Shooter Preparedness.

Rio Arriba County government recently experienced two near misses in regards to shooting incidents. On August 7, 2013, an acting volunteer fire chief showed up at a VFD meeting inebriated, wearing body armor and armed with a loaded assault rifle and handgun, threatening to shoot the other meeting participants. Because he was drunk, attendees were able to disarm him before anyone was injured.

In March of 2014, The Rio Arriba Health Commons was forced to lock down due to threats made against the facility. As a result of the scare, the Española Police Department conducted a workshop and live-drill of an active shooting incident. While the training was very helpful, and has improved the security of the facility, it is ironic that one facet of the training is telling the public how to remain safe from being shot by police responding to an incident. Other signs of police focus on preparation for incidents involving assault weapons, explosive devices and other implements of war including a military assault vehicle now owned by the Rio Arriba Sheriff's Department.

According to an Española Police Department spokesman, the Reactive Training Module currently used by police virtually ensures a violent outcome when police interact with armed individuals (Rio Grande Sun, July 10, 2014). Cessation of efforts to teach police to recognize and respond to special needs including mental illness, persons in crises, youth, hearing impaired, individuals suffering from dementia, the developmentally disabled, etc., combined with a sharp increase in training to respond to active shooters and terrorists, increases the likelihood of tragic mistakes on the part of law enforcement.

Police are meant to be community first responders, not an occupying military force, and special training is required for this purpose.

### *Proliferation of Guns in the Community*

Law enforcement personnel have the right to be safe in the conduct of their work. The United States has seen a proliferation of guns in the hands of people who shouldn't have them. This includes individuals with a history of violence, gang members, individuals suffering from substance abuse or severe mental illness, children, and teen-agers. At the same time, nationally, hate groups have deliberately targeted police officers for acts of deadly violence.

An overly armed populace can force law enforcement officers to behave, not like a community police department, but rather like a military force. In order to secure their own safety, police become more likely to err on the side of shooting. Nobody objects to the government taking steps to secure automobiles, and to deny driving privileges to individuals who are underage, unstable, using substances, or otherwise unfit. And yet, as a nation, we remain unable to engage in dialogue about responsible ownership and use of guns.

Adages such as "only a good guy with a gun can stop a bad guy with a gun" do not serve as a basis for sound policy. In this instance, there were no good guys or bad guys. There was only a very talented, distressed youth with a toy gun, and a policeman who discharged his weapon too hastily. Sensible policy could have prevented this tragedy and all the ripple effects it has had on our community from taking place.

## Policy Recommendations

The Rio Arriba Health and Human Services Department in conjunction with the Rio Arriba Community Health Council, will move forward with the following recommendations pending approval by the Board of Rio Arriba County Commissioners, and will report out on progress at regular intervals:

### *Behavioral Health Services for Youth*

- The youth behavioral services delivery system is badly frayed in Rio Arriba County. Most of the delivery system is funded through BHSD. Provider outreach needs to be stepped up, and the 24/7 Crisis line needs to be promoted more heavily. The RACHC strongly suggests that BHSD outline provider outreach efforts for health committee review, including a requirement to take out a full-page ad in the local newspaper for the crisis number, maintaining a face book page, and distributing flyers to local public places where youth congregate. The County of Rio Arriba should develop its own sources of funding for youth programming.
- The RACHC will reconvene its Behavioral Health Task Force strongly encouraging the Arizona providers to participate and seeking help and participation from BHSD; the task force will identify gaps in programming we need the Arizona providers to fill, and work to create an integrated behavioral health network.
- The RACHC will convene a Youth Services Task Force in conjunction with Rio Arriba Youth Services Providers and RACSTOP.

### *Police Training*

- The RACHC will convene a series of Mental Health First Aid and Crisis Intervention Training workshops for law enforcement and for individuals who work with youth. In addition, we will explore the addition of a workshop designed specifically for youth.

### *Gun Violence*

- The RACHC will convene a Gun Policy Task Force composed of advocates for persons with mental illness, law enforcement officials, advocates for youth and actual youth, gun advocates, family members of murder victims, and other interested parties, to develop policy recommendations designed to foster responsible gun ownership and responsible gun use; and to initiate public dialogue around the need to solve the problem of less than responsible proliferation of guns in our community.
- The RACHC will join forces with New Mexicans for Gun Safety to promote the use and distribution of free gun locks.
- The RACHC will join forces with Santa Fe to create a joint citizens' oversight committee to address use of violence by law enforcement officials against persons suffering from mental illness and other vulnerable populations.

### *Outreach*

- The RACHC will conduct an ongoing marketing and outreach campaign regarding access to services available through the NM Crisis line.

