STATE OF NEW MEXICO
Aging & Long-Term Services
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HEALTH SCIENCES
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Partners in a Pandemic

N.M. Aging and Long-Term Services Department Joins With
The University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center to Provide Services Amid COVID-19

NEW MEXICO- The New Mexico Aging and Long-Term Services Department (ALTSD) has partnered with The University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center (UNMHSC) for help in reducing a substantial backlog of people seeking supportive services.

More than 18,000 people, primarily elders and adults with disabilities in need of services or disability waivers, had applied for assistance through ALTSD, seeking help with food, shelter, transportation, health care and the effects of isolation.

Department employees were steadily chipping away at the list, but when the COVID-19 pandemic reached New Mexico, the department had to reallocate staff to stand up emergency resources and support the state's crisis response to the virus.

"COVID-19 inadvertently helped us to identify efficiency measures and partnerships that we otherwise might not have pursued," said ALTSD Cabinet Secretary Katrina Hotrum-Lopez. She reached out to Arthur Kaufman, MD, UNM's Vice Chancellor for Community Health, with whom she had worked in her previous role as director of Bernalillo County's Department of Behavioral Health Services.

Kaufman asked Francisco Ronquillo, PA, MA, a Health Extension Regional Officer, to lead the response. Working with a core team of colleagues in the UNM Office for Community Health, Ronquillo launched the Care Calls Initiative 2020, recruiting 89 volunteers to place calls to people on the waiting list.

"For many of these older adults this phone call is a big thing for them," Ronquillo said. "We're trying to make it personal. We want to make sure that we're connecting with them to update their information in the database and to see how they're doing."

The core team piloted the project first, using the knowledge gained to create orientation packets for new volunteers. About 1,600 calls have been completed since the program launched in June, he said.

Working from a script, volunteers spend up to 45 minutes on each call, going down a checklist to assess an individual's needs. They also fill out a Survey Monkey form that identifies the services being sought and records key social determinants of health.

ALTSD uses that information to prioritize its response, Ronquillo said. If someone reports an urgent need, volunteers pass that information back to the department for an emergency response, he added.

The volunteers include UNM Health Sciences students, undergraduates in preprofessional programs, community members, faculty and staff, Ronquillo said. Many speak Spanish or another language in addition to English, and most have been working from home since the UNM campus closed in response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

The Care Calls Initiative 2020 encompasses the entire state, Ronquillo said, but Bernalillo County residents whose needs fall outside the ALTSD mission may also receive assistance from UNM community health workers, who help people navigate available programs to help meet their needs.

Kaufman said the program is a natural outgrowth of the ongoing mission of the UNM Office of Community Health.

"When the call came, we knew it was an important need that we felt we had to respond to," he said. "Amid the COVID-19 outbreak, the problems of isolation and loneliness can be quite deadly for the sheltered elderly. It was one of the reasons we got involved."

Handing off the contact duties to the UNM partners has freed up ALTSD employees to respond to the quest for services, Hotrum-Lopez said.

"This is a win-win-win," she said. "It benefits everyone involved, from the people accessing supportive services to both of our organizations. We are so grateful to UNM for their incredible support, and more importantly for the critical connections they're making for our most vulnerable."

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