



NMPolitics.net the real story

March 27, 2018

Dear Mental Health America Awards Committee:

Please accept our 2017 multimedia coverage — “Distressed: A Look at Behavioral Health in Southern NM” — as a submission into the 2018 Mental Health America Media Awards contest.

For years, our reporters and editors have witnessed the devastating effects of a broken behavioral health system in southern New Mexico. We have covered numerous stories on the subject, including suicides, fatal officer-involved shootings and a major disruption caused when New Mexico’s governor abruptly halted Medicaid funds to behavioral health providers in 2013. But the extent of the systemic problems — and the resulting effects of the Medicaid freeze — had not been clearly explored and defined by any media outlet until our reporting project in 2017.

In an era of shrinking newsroom budgets and fewer reporters, it has become increasingly difficult to devote resources to the investigative projects that tackle the deepest, most-complex issues a community is facing. For Las Cruces, New Mexico — situated in a county of about 200,000 people on the U.S.-Mexico border — one such large-scale project that proved elusive was behavioral health. In early 2017, a partnership between the Las Cruces Sun-News (a daily newspaper) and NMPolitics.net (an independent online news organization) proved to be the spark that ignited a much-needed foray into this vast topic and the impacts of a failing system on thousands of southern New Mexicans’ lives.

The project was innovative in that it brought together three newsrooms under both public and private ownership — the Las Cruces Sun-News daily newspaper, NMPolitics.net online newspaper and KRWG-TV and Radio, which is the public TV and radio affiliate in southern New Mexico. Two Sun-News reporters, a Sun-News photojournalist and a KRWG news director joined to compile a comprehensive, in-depth look at the most-pressing issues facing behavioral health patients in southern New Mexico. The editor of NMPolitics.net spearheaded the project’s editing, and I assisted, as well. The multi-media project was part solutions journalism, part investigative journalism and part feature reporting. A key aim was to not only tell the story of the broken system, but also to highlight the real stories of the people who battle mental illness on a daily basis, as well as their families. In doing so, we attempted to counter the unfortunate stigma that often is associated with having a mental health condition, while at the same time not shying away from the real challenges such a condition can pose.

The project involved dozens of hours of interviews with numerous people in southern New Mexico and resulted in both TV, print, and online exposure of the resulting reporting. We delved deep into many federal and organizational data sets to paint a picture of the situation in New Mexico. The resulting series of articles, which were the biggest component of the project, published in November 2017. It was titled “Distressed: A Look at Behavioral Health in Southern NM.”

This four-part article series and two companion videos examined in-depth the most-pressing problems facing southern New Mexico’s behavioral health system. Juan Gabriel Torres, a Las Cruces man who battled addiction and mental health issues for years, was fatally shot by police in August 2016 after lunging at officers with a knife in hand. One article and a related video highlight Mr. Torres’ story, as well the impact on the children he leaves behind. A second article and accompanying video examines the major gaps in the health care system locally and profiles a local advocate, Micah Pearson, who’s seeking system-wide improvements. A third article focuses upon the need for a mental health court in Doña Ana County. A fourth article explores whether southern New Mexico needs a state-funded mental health hospital, which has been a much-discussed topic for years in our area. These published online at both the Las Cruces Sun-News website (www.lcsun-news.com) and NMPolitics.net.

(In the Additional Materials submission, I’ll include the links to the NMPolitics.net publication, which doesn’t have a paywall. The articles can be viewed on the Sun-News website, as well, but there is a paywall after a particular web browser has accessed the site five times in a given month.)

The resulting four-part series grabbed the attention of local policymakers, erased some myths that had been circulated locally and identified some problems that, prior to publication, had yet to be articulated publicly as problems.

To move forward with meaningful changes, it is imperative to understand the current state of behavioral health in southern New Mexico. Our community is leaps and bounds ahead of where it previously stood in terms of having access to accurate information about gaps in the system of care locally. This is a much-needed starting point for conversations about meaningful changes. It was truly a turning point in the public discussion about behavioral health care in southern New Mexico.

We hope to continue to build on this platform moving forward with ongoing coverage.

Thanks for your consideration of our 2017 collaborative behavioral health reporting project. Please contact me with any questions. Please see our staff biographies below.

Sincerely,

Lucas Peerman

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Biographies of staff who compiled "Distressed: A Look at Behavioral Health in Southern NM"



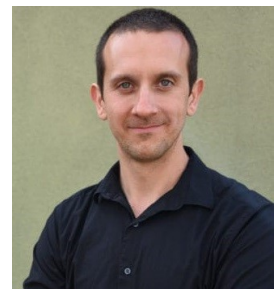
Carlos Andres López is a native of Las Cruces in southern New Mexico. He is a 2010 graduate of New Mexico State University and has a bachelor's degree in journalism. For nearly a decade, he's continuously worked and contributed content to various publications across New Mexico. Some of his work has been featured nationally in publications like USA Today. He is currently a full-time reporter for the daily Las Cruces Sun-News, covering courts, crime and county government. He also is an avid baker.

Diana Alba Soular was born and raised in rural southern New Mexico. She attended New Mexico State University, earning bachelor's degrees in journalism and biology in 2004. After graduation, she was hired at the Las Cruces Sun-News as a news reporter. In her 14 years at the publication, she's covered everything from visiting U.S. presidential candidates to Spaceport America to agriculture (especially the state's favorite crop: chile peppers). She enjoys traveling with her husband, taking photographs and camping.



Robin Zielinski was born and raised in Trenton, New Jersey. She attended New Mexico State University, earning a bachelor's degree in journalism and mass communications in 2005. After graduation, she returned to New Jersey to work as a photojournalist for The Trentonian and NJBiz Magazine. Zielinski returned to New Mexico and began working for the Las Cruces Sun-News in 2010. Over the span of Robin's 13-year career, she has earned 19 awards and honors for her work. She enjoys collaborating with team members on reporting projects and credits her accolades, in part, to their contributions. When she's not behind the camera, she's spending time with her husband and two sons or teaching photography classes at a local community college.

Heath Haussamen grew up in the state capital of Santa Fe, attending New Mexico State University upon graduating from high school. He delved wholeheartedly into the field of journalism, becoming editor of the student newspaper at NMSU. He went on to report for the Santa Fe New Mexican, the Las Cruces Sun-News and New Mexico In Depth. For years, he has owned and operated NMPolitics.net, developing it into a go-to source for information about New Mexico state politics. He has garnered numerous awards and national recognition for his reporting and editing work. He resides in Las Cruces, N.M., and, outside the office, enjoys spending time with his daughter.





Lucas Peerman started his journalism career in 1998, while still in high school, working afternoons at the Las Cruces Sun-News through an internship program. Twenty years and a handful of jobs later, Peerman now helms the Sun-News. Peerman earned a journalism degree at New Mexico State University, where he also served as editor of the student newspaper for a semester. Following college, Peerman completed an internship on the sports desk at the Boston Globe. His first full-time job out of college was on the copy desk at the Santa Fe New Mexican. In late 2004, he returned to the Sun-News to edit Pulse, the newspaper's weekly entertainment magazine. Peerman created the role of digital editor in 2012 to oversee the Sun-News' transition to 21st century media. In 2016, he became news director and the following year, he took on more responsibility, overseeing the print and digital publications for the Las Cruces Sun-News, Silver City Sun-News and Deming Headlight. Outside of work, Peerman is active in the local Big Brothers Big Sisters organization, and has a passion for NMSU sports and exploring his home state of New Mexico.

In addition to serving as News Director, **Anthony Moreno** anchors KRWG-FM's Morning Edition and KRWG-TV's "In Focus" and "New Mexico Now." Anthony is from Kansas City, Missouri. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Communication from Pittsburg State University. While at Pitt State, he was introduced to National Public Radio by a professor. From that moment Anthony knew that he wanted to be a part of public radio. Prior to KRWG, Anthony served as a local afternoon host for All Things Considered for a public radio station in Southeast Kansas, where he reported and produced local features from around the region, hosted and produced a weekly university program, and he served as a substitute host for a locally produced classical music program. Off the clock, Anthony enjoys live music performances, jogging, playing basketball, watching his hometown sports teams and trying new foods. He enjoys serving the community in southern New Mexico and West Texas, along with exploring the rich cultural landscape that exists throughout the Southwest.

