

Our response to mental illness is expensive, ineffective

Isaac Benton and Brad Winter / Albuquerque City Councilors

Every day we see the face of mental illness and substance abuse on our streets. Nearly all of us have friends or relatives who struggle with such conditions.

In local government, we see the tremendous cost of providing treatment in the most expensive and least beneficial ways, such as the emergency room or jail.

As a community, we already pay for behavioral health services in costly ways with inconsistent outcomes and very little progress on the long-term stability of the patient.

Earlier this year, we convened a bipartisan group of elected officials representing the city of Albuquerque, Bernalillo County and the state of New Mexico to form a task force on behavioral health in order to address the issues of homelessness, mental health and substance abuse in Albuquerque.

Our goal was not only to better understand the problem, but also to work together to produce actionable policy items.

The task force comprises health care professionals, law enforcement, advocates, and leaders from the state, city, county and the courts. This year alone, more than seven other organizations have looked at similar issues and have reached very similar conclusions.

The task force found that, like other cities around the country, we are not addressing behavioral health in an effective way.

Identifying and providing treatment options for people with behavioral health issues before a crisis occurs is an important step in improving the system of care. Currently, our reactive system sends law enforcement to do the job of behavioral health professionals.

The problem is compounded by the fact that we do not provide first responders with viable options other than jail or the emergency room. There is no effective support system, such as intensive case management and supportive housing, to break the cycle and prevent further crisis situations.

The task force recommends that a crisis resource center be created as an intermediate level of treatment for people who are headed toward a crisis or to “step down” after a person has experienced a crisis.

Additionally, it recommends that teams of trained behavioral health professionals partner with law enforcement to provide options to better resolve crisis encounters. Finally, intensive management and supportive housing will help to break the cycle by providing a case manager who can work with the client on an ongoing basis to find medical care, housing and a job.

Throughout this effort, we have seen refreshing signs that public policy makers are willing to work together. Addressing the behavioral health crisis in our community must continue to be a bipartisan effort. We hope that this level of cooperation between the City Council, the mayor, the Bernalillo County Commission, the state Legislature and the governor’s administration continues.

In an effort to address the behavioral health crises in our community, we are reaching for low-hanging fruit. We are introducing a bill to designate \$600,000 for intensive case management and \$500,000 to serve the mentally ill

released from the Metropolitan Detention Center.

As the upcoming legislative session arrives, we will be proposing a partnership to fund these initiatives. We will be advocating for regional solutions so that other New Mexico communities can participate in addressing their own behavioral health needs.

These measures are not unrealistically ambitious. Addressing these gaps will go a long way to ensure the health and safety of our community, reduce costs and help people to more effectively manage their conditions.

We need your support. Please take the time to contact your city councilor, county commissioner or state legislator and ask them to join in this effort.