

**New Mexico's Behavioral Health Institute:
A Key to Better Mental Health Care
By Senator Pete Campos**

The New Mexico Behavioral Health Institute is a key provider of mental health services and long-term care statewide, serving as the foundation for any plan to improve those services. It also serves as a vital component of the regional economy of northeastern New Mexico.

The institute is part of the Department of Health and was renamed in 2005 to better reflect its mission. It now needs much more than a name change: critical funding to expand its ability to serve New Mexicans. Improvements worth \$40 million, which will be considered during the 2014 legislative session, are needed to complete the work already done to help make this a first-class facility.

The institute serves thousands of New Mexicans each year and is typically the provider of last resort for those who voluntarily seek intensive mental health care; New Mexicans who need intensive long-term care and assistance with everyday functions; juvenile boys who have exhibited inappropriate sexual behavior; and criminal justice professionals seeking mental health evaluations of people accused of committing felonies. These critical services are provided by a caring and dedicated staff that is, unfortunately, grossly underpaid for the work they do.

The current behavioral health care crisis in New Mexico will only increase the need for the services provided by the New Mexico Behavioral Health Institute as more and more New Mexicans are unable to find the help they need in their communities, close to home.

The long-term care facility, which currently serves up to 176 New Mexicans at one time, is indicative of the type of care that will be needed in the future: intensive (and expensive) hands-on care for people suffering from mental illnesses that make it impossible for them to function in any other setting. The care that is provided is not and cannot be provided anywhere else and truly saves lives, both those of the residents receiving the care and those of their families who might otherwise be responsible for caring for their loved ones.

I'll make every effort to secure half of the \$40 million that is necessary to continue the expansion of the long-term care facility and that is critical to meeting the needs of all New Mexicans. More than 14 percent of New Mexico's population is 65 years old or older – slightly more than the national percentage – and the proportion of elderly in New Mexico is expected to

grow at one of the fastest rates in the country over the next 20 years. While relatively few elderly will need the type of mental health care provided at the New Mexico Behavioral Health Institute, we can expect that the need for mental health services for the elderly will grow as our population ages.

This has been a priority since 1991 when we appropriated \$800,000 under Governor Bruce King. Our commitment has continued as more than \$36 million has been appropriated for capital improvements at the institute since 2008. These investments have resulted in an up-to-date, secure facility owned and operated by the people of New Mexico.

The institute's role in our criminal and juvenile justice system cannot be overstated. Providing secure, 24-hour-a-day care for young men who have already exhibited inappropriate and potentially dangerous sexual behavior provides an immediate service by keeping the young men separated from other New Mexicans and provides a longer-term service by preparing them to be reintegrated into society. As we work to reform our criminal justice system by making it more efficient and effective, we cannot lose sight of the role that the New Mexico Behavioral Health Institute plays in keeping us safe.

We've struggled through tough economic times to get where we are today at the institute. I'm proud that many of the employees trained locally at Luna Community College and New Mexico Highlands University are able to remain in, and give back to, their home town. Together, I'm confident that we'll be able to continue to make the New Mexico Behavioral Health Institute something that all New Mexicans can point to with pride.