

NM to redesign major disability program

BY DAN MCKAY / JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Published: Tuesday, July 9th, 2019 at 6:31pm

Updated: Tuesday, July 9th, 2019 at 9:21pm



The Roundhouse towers over nearby buildings in Santa Fe. (Eddie Moore/Albuquerque Journal)

Copyright © 2019 Albuquerque Journal

SANTA FE – Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham said Tuesday that her administration plans to overhaul a state-run program that helps people with developmental disabilities and end the decade-long wait thousands of New Mexico families endure as they seek services.

The goal, Lujan Grisham said, is to eliminate the backlog – composed of about 5,000 individuals – over a six-year period. People now wait an average of 13 years for services under the Developmental Disabilities Waiver program.

Lujan Grisham, a Democrat who took office this year, didn't offer any cost estimate for the proposal. Some components will require approval from the federal government or state Legislature.

“A waiting list of this size is completely unacceptable and indicative of a lack of care and attention by state leadership in recent years,” Lujan Grisham, a former state health secretary, said in a written statement.

Legislative analysts have projected it would cost about \$131 million a year to provide the extra services if 4,000 people were removed from the waiting list. But they also have recommended taking steps to control costs, noting that some states are more cost-effective at delivering similar services.

Lujan Grisham on Tuesday outlined a multi-step approach that would include – over the next six years – establishing tiers of services tailored to how much help the individual needs.

Rep. Elizabeth Thomson, D-Albuquerque, said the changes sound reasonable. Her own son, she said, requires around-the-clock care, but his budget for services might be equal to a different individual who is able to drive and hold down a job.

“There are people on the waiver who are getting way more services than they need,” Thomson said in an interview, “and there are people who are not getting the services they need.”

She said she is hopeful that the state’s revenue sources are stable enough to cover the cost of moving everyone off the waiting list.

Lujan Grisham said her plan includes:

- Providing additional help to people even as they remain stuck on the waiting list. This year’s state budget includes about \$1.5 million to plan and begin offering new services to people on the waiting list.
- Getting in touch with individuals who are on the waiting list and enrolled in Medicaid this year to ensure they’re maximizing the benefits they can get through Medicaid.
- Launching a new program next summer to provide support and at least some services to every individual on the waiting list. Health Secretary Kathy Kunkel said the state will solicit public comment to help guide decisions on establishing the program.
- More broadly redesigning the developmental disabilities program to establish tiers and move everyone off the waiting list within six years.

New Mexico’s waiver program serves people with developmentally disabilities, such as autism. Participants receive therapy, help with employment and other

services aimed at allowing them to be active members of the community. Nearly 5,000 people are enrolled in waiver services altogether.

It's called a "waiver" program because the federal government, for some states, has waived the requirement to use a nursing home or other institutional setting to provide services.

But incredibly long waits have plagued the program for years.

Costs per client are growing, legislative analysts say, and the percentage of people diagnosed with autism and Down syndrome is climbing.