



## \$6.4M grant for job development benefits rural NM

BY: OLIVIER UYTTEBROUCK

A new program designed to boost employment opportunities in rural northern New Mexico is getting \$6.4 million in federal support.

State and federal officials on Wednesday announced the grant intended to get more residents working in health care, construction and other skilled trades.

The program, dubbed the Northern New Mexico Workforce Integration Network, was among 32 to receive funding. That's out of 509 total applications, meaning its selection is "a big deal," according to Gene Sperling, an economic adviser to President Biden.

"We are really proud of this project," Sperling said.

The program is intended to provide training and career support for 1,750 people in seven counties over a period of three years.

New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham called the grant "an investment that a state like New Mexico both needs and deserves."

During an online news conference Wednesday, the governor and others say it works on multiple levels: providing rural New Mexico a much-needed skilled workforce and making sure New Mexicans have the kind of jobs that can support a family.

A core element of the program is a partnership with 33 employers, unions and governments, including some of the state's largest hospitals and construction companies, which have agreed to help provide career pathways for participants.

New Mexico's program was chosen because it fulfills a key goal of the American Recovery Plan "that we have a more enduring, equitable recovery," Sperling said. "That we don't have a recovery where only some people recover."

The program also will focus outreach efforts on low-skilled workers, people recovering from substance abuse disorders and formerly incarcerated people, according to a program description.

One key goal is to confront generational substance abuse and addiction problems that plague northern New Mexico, said Monica Abeita, program manager of the Regional Development Corporation, an Española-based private not-for-profit economic development group.

Malcolm Mundy, the charge nurse in one of the medical surgical units in Christus St. Vincent Regional Medical Center in 2021. (Eddie Moore/ Albuquerque Journal)

"There are about 3,000 people graduating out of recovery centers every year throughout northern New Mexico," said Abeita, who leads the grant program. "We are going to be working with them months before they are graduating from that program so they have a job placement already lined up – they are working toward that goal."

Five substance abuse recovery centers are listed as partners in the program. The project description lists 23 employers as partners, including Arpad Builders, Bradbury Stamm Construction, CHRISTUS St. Vincent, Los Alamos National Laboratory and Jaynes Corporation. Other employers include a variety of hospitals, medical centers and three electrical cooperatives.

Together, those employers estimate an immediate need for more than 1,000 additional workers, the description said.

Other partners include a variety of labor unions and several higher education institutions with a presence in the region.

The program will focus on Colfax, Los Alamos, Mora, Rio Arriba, San Miguel, Santa Fe and Taos counties. The region is home to about 285,000 people, of whom 55% identify as Hispanic and 4% as Native American.

Funding for the Good Jobs Challenge grants, which the U.S. Department of Commerce announced this week, comes from \$500 million included in President Biden's American Rescue Plan.

The grants are intended to provide well-paid jobs to 50,000 Americans in such key industries as health care, information technology, energy and agriculture.

Santa Fe Community College is identified as the "backbone" institution in the health care sector.

The grant will help ensure that students training for health care professions receive on-the-job clinical training opportunities, Deputy Commerce Secretary Don Graves said at the online new conference.

"These projects will expand access to the workforce and they are going to increase labor participation through a focus on job quality and equity," Graves said