

SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN

Nonprofits in rural health care, addiction support, period product access, water conservation earn Piñon Awards

by Clara Bates

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Dr. Randy Brown waits a moment as his Sunrise Clinics organization is applauded before taking the stage Tuesday during the 39th Annual Piñon Awards. Sunrise Clinics provides rural health care in northeastern New Mexico, helping fill a gap in rural care the state has long struggled with.

Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

A water conservation organization, a collection of rural health care clinics and a group that pushes for access to period products were among the nonprofits honored at La Fonda on Tuesday night for this year's Santa Fe Community Foundation Piñon Awards.

Around 280 people gathered in the ballroom for the annual celebration of nonprofits. The awards, which include an unrestricted \$5,000 grant, were presented to Sunrise Clinics, Free Flow New Mexico, the Friendship Club of Santa Fe and Amigos Bravos.

They were selected out of a "record breaking" 137 groups that were nominated, said Christopher Goett, president and CEO of the community foundation.

Sunrise Clinics provides rural health care in northeastern New Mexico, helping fill a gap in rural care the state has long struggled with. The clinics provide primary and behavioral health care services regardless of a patient's ability to pay.

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The clinics received an award for resiliency, which honors an organization that “builds the resilience of people and communities most vulnerable to emergencies, such as natural disasters, public health crises, and systemic injustices,” according to the foundation’s website.

The organization has six clinics, including in Santa Rosa and Las Vegas, N.M., and provides virtual exams in more than 20 school health centers.

“In New Mexico, finding providers to live in rural communities is tough,” said Randy Brown, CEO of Sunrise Clinics, in a video shown at the event. “We’ve been very successful in recruiting physicians and nurse practitioners to rural New Mexico.”

Challenges for clinics

New Mexicans have long faced lack of access to care in rural areas, including lack of primary care, long distances to travel and lack of obstetric care. Rural health care providers face high costs to sustain access to care. The result can be poorer health outcomes for the more than more than 20% of New Mexicans who live in rural areas.

Brown said the organization has worked to attract personnel as well as innovate, providing virtual care in schools. Distance is the “biggest struggle,” he said, with most Sunrise patients needing to travel upwards of 80 miles to reach the nearest hospital.

Beginning in 2027, adult Medicaid recipients will be subject to increased paperwork requirements to prove they work or qualify for an exception. Nearly 90,000 adults across New Mexico could be permanently disenrolled, the state has estimated. Federal changes to Medicaid pose a looming challenge, Brown said in an interview before the event started — but the organization hopes to remain resilient in the face of those changes.

“Obviously Medicaid changes will impact us, but we’re not going to let that get in the way,” Brown said in the video shown at Tuesday’s event.

Brown said there were over 2,100 Sunrise patients in the last year who are at risk of losing coverage when the work requirements go into effect, also putting \$2 million in revenue for the organization at risk. The organization is working to help connect patients with volunteer and education opportunities, he said, to maintain their eligibility.

Increasing access to period products



Laurie Merrill, executive director and founder of Free Flow New Mexico, speaks Tuesday with her son Archer Becker before the 39th Annual Piñon Awards at La Fonda. The group, which has worked since 2020 to fight lack of access to period products and stigma surrounding menstruation, received the Courageous Innovation Award.

Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

Free Flow New Mexico received the Courageous Innovation Award, which honors an organization that uses a bold and courageous approach to “create new solutions to persistent problems.”

The organization has worked since 2020 to fight lack of access to period products and stigma surrounding menstruation. Free Flow New Mexico has distributed around 1 million period products, Laurie Merrill, its founder and executive director, said in an interview before the event.

She said in her event speech she expects the organization will distribute another million products in the next 18 months, amid an increase in requests.

Merrill said in an interview before the ceremony people are surprised to learn lack of access to period products exists in New Mexico and the United States.

“A lot of people, many people, are surprised that it’s occurring here. They often think that it’s someplace else, outside of our country,” she said, adding it is “our working class that are being impacted.”

The average cost of period products monthly is \$9, she said, which can strain families “when people are barely able to afford food right now.” In rural areas that average monthly cost can be up to \$15, she said.

“And there is no federal program that supports the purchase of period products,” she added.

Recovery and watersheds



Mary Stramel, with the Friendship Club of Santa Fe, speaks to the gathered crowd at the 39th Annual Piñon Awards on Tuesday. The organization has supported people in recovery from drug and alcohol addictions since 1979, including through group meetings, and received the Quiet Inspiration Award.

Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

The Friendship Club of Santa Fe received the Quiet Inspiration Award, which honors an organization that works quietly and respectfully among a wide range of people, earning longtime support and trust from its constituents, according to the foundation.

The organization has supported people in recovery from drug and alcohol addictions since 1979, including through group meetings.

Executive Director Sherman Allen said there are now 55 in-person meetings every week, on topics ranging from alcohol and narcotics addictions to gambling addiction and family support groups. The organization also hosts a podcast.

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Amigos Bravos was the recipient of the Tried & True Award, which honors an organization that has served the community for over a decade “with consistent and high-quality programs, services, and opportunities despite changes in the external environment,” according to a news release.

The organization has fought since 1988 to protect the state’s water by restoring New Mexico’s watershed health, holding polluters accountable and building a broader community water movement, according to a video shown at the event. Volunteers work on projects including erosion prevention and stream restoration.



Francisco Guevara with Amigos Bravos watches a short video Tuesday made for the nonprofit during the 39th Annual Piñon Awards. The organization has fought since 1988 to protect the state's water by restoring New Mexico's watershed health, holding polluters accountable and building a broader community water movement.

Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

The community foundation has presented the Piñon Awards every year since 1987. The \$5,000 awards, as in previous years, will be provided by the foundation with underwriting support from Enterprise Bank & Trust.



The crowded ballroom at La Fonda on the Plaza before the 39th Annual Piñon Awards on Tuesday. Around 280 people gathered in the ballroom for the annual celebration of nonprofits.

Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican