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Keller, Lewis back behavioral health center for city

By Martin Salazar / Journal Staff Writer
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The two candidates vying to be Albuquerque's next mayor agree that the city needs to build a place where people can get mental health treatment and addiction services.

State Auditor Tim Keller and City Councilor Dan Lewis, who are facing off in the Nov. 14 mayoral runoff, addressed a few dozen Albuquerque Interfaith leaders on Sunday. But unlike most of the previous forums, the candidates appeared separately.

"We are not going to wait any longer for anyone else to deal with (our behavioral health challenges)," Keller told the group.

"I'm looking forward to working together with Raúl Torrez, our DA, on tackling these issues, but also the (Albuquerque Bernalillo County Government Commission) that you all monitor and go to," Lewis said.

Keller said the city should kick in funding to build a behavioral health/mental health treatment center. He said nonprofits already providing behavioral health services should operate it, and the county, which passed a tax for behavioral health programs, should manage it.

Keller said the city should also invest in community engagement teams made up of a paramedic and a social worker who do outreach to the homeless or home visits for individuals with behavioral or mental health issues. A paramedic can stabilize the individual's medical situation, while a social worker can find the appropriate help for them, he said.



Mayoral candidates Tim Keller and Dan Lewis

Keller said those two programs would be more effective and cheaper than taking struggling individuals to emergency rooms or booking them into jail.

Lewis, who addressed the group after his opponent, said the city spends about \$45 million a year on behavioral health services and related programs. Like Keller, he said the city should invest in a behavioral health center and form partnerships to ensure that there would be beds and services available there for people who need them, including those dealing with drug addiction.

Lewis also said he would double down on Albuquerque Heading Home, a program that helped find housing for about 700 of the city's most-vulnerable homeless people.

Interfaith leaders pressed Lewis on after-school programs and whether the city should be funding them. He has previously said the city should reconsider funding the programs, noting that the money could be directed to the Albuquerque Police Department.

"My words sometimes have been taken out of context," Lewis said Sunday. "... Sometimes when it's reported as Dan Lewis wants to do away with these, that's not the case. I've funded every one of them. I've sponsored many of them. I want to see those programs continue, but I want to have the discussion with APS. I want to have the discussion about the priorities of public safety in our city and how we can accomplish those things together."