

County to provide psychological support to asylum seekers

By Jessica Dyer / Journal Staff Writer

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More than 2,200 asylum-seeking migrants have come through Albuquerque in recent months, spending a few days in town before catching a bus or plane to meet sponsors in other parts of the country.



Charlene Pyskoty

But Charlene Pyskoty says even a short stopover is enough time to make a difference in their lives, which is why Bernalillo County is allocating up to \$100,000 to fund support services. The money will expand an existing \$580,000 contract with PB&J Family Services, a nonprofit organization that will offer crisis debriefing and other coping skills to children and parents seeking refuge in the U.S.

Pyskoty, one of five elected county commissioners, said in announcing the funding on Friday that “it’s hard to even imagine the events these kids have lived through.” But as a professional mental health counselor, she said she understands the value of even a “short-term” intervention.

“I believe this in my heart – that the most therapeutic thing is just making a connection with somebody who cares about them, somebody who is kind and compassionate and says ‘You’re safe now. This is a safe place,’” Pyskoty said at a news conference.

Federal immigration authorities have been busing the migrants to Albuquerque following processing at the border. Pyskoty said women with children account for 65% of the 2,200-plus who have arrived in Albuquerque thus far, and she stressed that they had already undergone formal processing.

“These are people who are definitely in our system,” she said. “They’re not illegal immigrants.”

The \$100,000 comes from the behavioral health tax county voters approved in 2014. The gross receipts tax yields about \$21 million annually, and the county appropriates \$3 million for reducing “adverse childhood experiences.” Not all ACE funding has been expended, enabling this one-time allocation to help asylum-seekers,

said Margarita Chavez Sanchez, assistant director for the Behavioral Health Services Department.

She said the expenditure aligns with the tax's purpose, which is to provide "more mental and behavioral health services for adults and children in the Albuquerque and Bernalillo County area," according to the ballot question.



Steven Michael Quezada

The county joins the city of Albuquerque in allocating funds to help the asylum-seekers; the City Council earlier this week approved spending \$250,000 to help support the faith-based and nonprofit community groups that have for months used donations and volunteers to temporarily shelter, feed and clothe the migrants passing through town.

County Commissioner Steven Michael Quezada said that those groups sought help from the county as well, which has the resources to help with the migrants' "psychological and emotional" needs. The services could include crisis intervention, parenting classes or play dates away from the migrants' temporarily shelters – which may be hotels, churches or Expo New Mexico – and other family bonding activities.

PB&J does "life-changing work," Quezada said, and it has experience working with the immigrant community.

He said he knows that some people object to using public money to help the asylum-seekers but said spending this \$100,000 would not infringe on other behavioral health initiatives, like those related to homelessness or addiction. Immigrants, he said, also pay gross receipts tax in the county and therefore contribute to the behavioral health fund.

"We believe we're using the money responsibly, and we have the right to use it for the things that we think are important for Bernalillo County and our citizens," he said.

Chavez Sanchez said participation in any PB&J assistance will be voluntary and that the county hopes to somehow gauge the effectiveness of the services, perhaps by asking those who partake to complete questionnaires.

Contact the writer.

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