

El Diario Sin Nombre

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HSD Employee is Said to be Guardian Angel of West Mesa Victims' Families

Christine Ross has worked as an FAA at the SW Albuquerque ISD office for one-and-half years, and never in her wildest dreams did she think she would be the person leading police to uncover the remains of 11 women buried in the desert just one block from her house.

"I would go over there [the excavation site] and see these families pictures of the victims; it was very moving," said Ross, who lives with her 15-year-old daughter. "Sometimes there would be as many as 50 people at the site; over the past month, I've seen several different grieving families, but I never approached them."

Ross will probably never forget her experience that began on Monday, Feb. 2, while she was walking her dog with a friend after work. "We often walked around the perimeter of this open space," she said. "For some reason that evening we decided to walk down the middle of the 100 acre open area. My dog, Ruca (it means "ol lady" or "girl" in Spanish) ran ahead and found something on the ground. She has found dead animal bones in the past, so I screamed at her to get away. But when we came upon the bone my instincts, a gut feeling, told me this bone was not normal: it looked like a human femur."

Ross decided to take a picture of the bone with her cell phone. Then she called her sister who is a nurse and told her she was e-mailing the photo to her for her to see. She remained at the sight when, almost immediately, her sister called her back saying she thought it was a human femur and to call the police.

She called the non-emergency police number and had to convince the operator that something was wrong. "After I stated the situation, I had to do a little convincing because the dispatcher began asking me how I knew it was a human bone, and what was I doing out there? When the operator agreed to send a police officer to the scene, she couldn't find Ross's location, so she instructed her to go back to her home and an officer would meet her there.

"When the officer arrived it was photo, and then he asked me to take completed a police report, and I

"The following day at the office, when I mentioned what had happened seemed interested in following up

"Six days later, when reports of work rushed up to me saying, 'Oh my God! See what you have started.' When I went home that evening, I couldn't sleep."

Six weeks later, KOB TV rang Ross's doorbell asking her what happened. She agreed to talk with the reporter about what had happened; soon after, other local news media followed up as well. Then last Saturday she appeared on national television's *America's Most Wanted*. "It took them six hours to interview me and have me recreate what happened for 30 seconds of television time." When asked if this was done during the workday, she said, "Yes, and I took annual leave."

Although Ross thought it the right thing to do for *America's Most Wanted* to report on what had happened out in the West Mesa several years ago, she believes the person who did this might also be dead.

"One suspect who I've read about used to live in a nearby trailer park. Back then, he could have buried the bodies without being seen. One can only imagine how he did it!"

Ross was born in Rio Rancho and graduated from Cibola High School in 1992. After graduating from UNM with a Major in Sociology and Criminology, she worked at All Faiths Receiving Home in their protective services unit.

What happened to Christine on Ground Hog's Day may be more transcendent than what has thus far been reported – it could



Christine Ross said the police officer who initially met with her, later called her and thanked her for reporting the discovery to police.

"Christine must be the Guardian Angel for all of those mothers who were missing their daughters," Yvonne Martin, SW Albuquerque ISD office Line Manager II.

almost dark," said Ross. "I showed him the him to where I had found the bone. He went home."

we were having a little luncheon and that's pened to me to the girls. No one at the time about what I had said to them," said Ross. the bodies started coming out, friends at

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HSD Financial Staff Help Guide State's Recovery and Reinvestment Act

ASD Director Elaine Olah came to the department from the State Treasury Office three years ago. Since then, she has been quite busy as HSD's Chief Financial Officer. Lately, however, she has had a lot more put on her plate: she was asked to be the department's point person for administering the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). The ARRA is an unprecedented Federal effort, not seen since the Great Depression, to jumpstart a sagging national economy by funneling money to states' coffers to keep programs operating.

When asked how she likes her newly found responsibilities, Olah simply said, "It keeps me busy. Come to think of it, I don't think I've had a boring moment since I came to HSD. This just adds another level of complexity."

Olah said the money coming through the department for the ARRA funds existing programs. During the recovery period, HSD will receive an estimated \$965 Million in federal stimulus funds – the department, however, does not have a lot of discretion about how the funds will be spent. In fact, 76.4 percent of the funding will simply replace General Fund dollars, yet 22 percent will help us meet increased demand for benefits resulting from the economic downturn. (The nearly one billion dollars the HSD can draw upon through ARRA is a lot of money, but it is only about 25 percent of the department's current fiscal year budget.)

Olah said there might be opportunities for communities to increase the types of services it offers clients through the Community Services Block Grant Program. Additionally, the federal government has already increased by about 15 percent the benefits a family on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) receives each month.

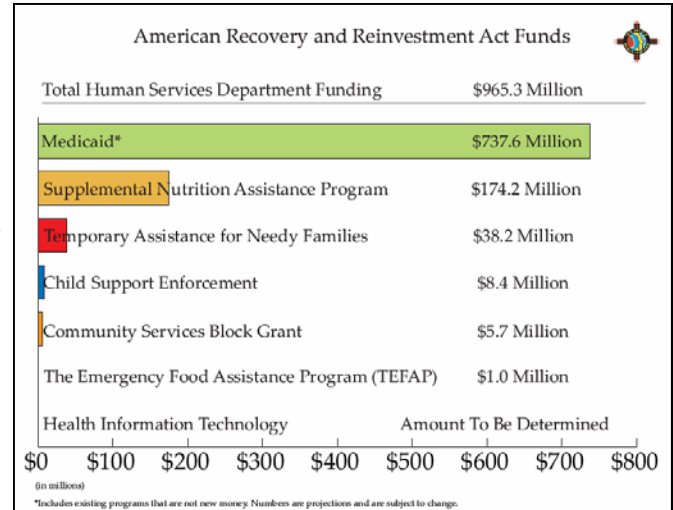
In addition, funding allows HSD to make needed improvements in the Child Support Enforcement Program that it couldn't do otherwise. "We may be able to restore funding to improve customer services for the Child Support Enforcement Call Center, pursue more court orders and medical court orders in the CSED and purchase non-modular furniture for the new Las Vegas HSD office," Olah said.

Elaine is not the only person helping to administer the ARRA for the department. Each Program Division has identified staff to serve on the HSD Accountability and Transparency Team; together with the resources of the ASD, the department will be sure that ARRA funds are spent as intended.

The Governor's office has also tapped HSD's Deputy Secretary, Daryl Schwebach (HSD's top bean counter) to work on the Executive Director's Committee of the New Mexico Office of Recovery and Reinvestment (NMORR) that oversees the initiatives of 12 other state agencies and billions of dollars in ARRA funding.

"As HSD is one of the biggest recipients of Federal funds for the state, we have a huge role to play in the stimulus package" Schwebach said. "My goal is to make sure that the ARRA and NMORR requirements do not become overly burdensome to the agencies managing the funds. The funding is intended to go toward rebuilding our economy, not building a new bureaucracy."

New Mexico state government has set up an interactive website for people to use to find out more about the NMORR at www.recovery.state.nm.us. HSD also has a webpage on this website depicting what the department is doing in support of the NMORR, www.recovery.state.nm.us/agencies.



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even be mystical. Three of the victims were loosely associated with her: Her sister had gone to high school with one of the victims; another was one of her close friend's nieces; a third victim's daughter goes to dance class with her daughter.

I didn't know any of these people personally, but the connection is eerie to me," said Ross. "I went out there that day for a reason."

Perhaps co-worker Yvonne Martin said it best: "Christine is the Guardian Angel for all of those mothers who were missing their daughters."

When asked if there should be some sort of memorial built on the site where she found the first of hundreds of human bones that were recovered, Ross said, "Yes, I'm glad that I could help find closure for these families, but it's not total closure because they may never be sure who did this."

New Mexico Works Training Conference Focuses on Strategies to Increase Work Participation for TANF Clients

Growing TANF caseloads are impacting both the Income Support Division staff and the *NM Works* Career Development Specialists. (NM Works has the responsibility for case management of TANF participants.) Over the past year the number of TANF clients referred to *NM Works* has increased by 38 percent to 8,389, while the overall caseload has increased by 16.8 percent to, 15,997.

The *NMWorks* contractors serving TANF participants are: Eastern Area Workforce Development Board, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)/Teamworks, and New Mexico State University. Some contractors base staff in ISD offices to expedite services.

Over the years, *NMWorks* staff have helped tens of thousands of low-income families become work ready and find and keep employment. In this budget year alone, they have already helped 1,700 find work.

To help *NM Works* case managers meet the increasing requirements for their services, a one-day training conference was held on April 15 at the Isleta Hotel and Conference Center. The conference's objective was to look at new strategies and solutions for increasing work participation among the growing number of TANF clients.

"As part of the TANF block grant funding, HSD allocated funds to the CSW/Teamworks to organize the first state-wide *NMWorks* Conference, which was attended by over 200 Career Development Specialists and Support Services providers," said Evelyn Costello, ISD Central Office. "Conference topics were 'Motivational Interviewing re: Substance Abuse,' 'Making Case Management Work: Empowering People for Change' and 'Disability Issues for TANF Recipients'."

The conference began with a powerful discussion panel of extraordinary women who shared their stories beginning with the uncertainties of walking through the ISD's doors as TANF applicants and ending with newly-found successes with support from ISD and *NMWorks* programs and case managers.

The conference's keynote speaker was Dr. Beverly Ford. She spoke on the value of 'Partnering with Clients for Change.' Since 1986, she has conducted trainings in case management, welfare reform, client empowerment and work preparation for over one hundred thousand people in 42 states.

HSD Training Director, Cheryl Thompson, who is always eager to lend a hand to make these types of events successful, exceeded the event. She provided an energetic conference welcome/overview and introductions of the speakers throughout the day.

Other HSD facilitators were ISD's Wendy Chavez-Paez and Candice Hewitt. Together they organized another *Walk in My Shoes* poverty simulation giving conference participants an opportunity to assume the role of a low-income family living on a limited budget. (See related El Diario Sin Nombre article about ISD staff's participation in the poverty simulation at <http://www.hsd.state.nm.us/pdf/newsroom/diario/SinNombreJul08.pdf>).

The conference included an awards recognition ceremony for outstanding staff and speaker appreciations presented by Mary Ann Baker-Randall, CSW/Teamworks Director, "The comments I heard from the attendees were all highly positive. Most left feeling very energized from what they had heard from the speakers that day."

HSD Deputy Secretary, Katie Falls concluded the conference with a well-received message to all attendees regarding the value of their work, day in and day out.



From left are Dr. Beverly Ford, Katie Falls, HSD Deputy HSD Secretary and ISD's Nicole Taylor and Cathy Sisneros.

PARIS Helps HSD Fight Fraud

The vast majority of New Mexican's enrolled in income support programs who decide to move to another state and enroll in the same programs are not intentionally trying to receive benefits from multiple states at the same time. However, there are some people who attempt to make a living by doing just that – and not in just two states, but in several states at the same time. "We found someone who was receiving income support benefits in five states at the same time, including New Mexico," said OIG's Stephanie Valdez.

To combat this type of public assistance fraud states have access to information and data to assist them in maintaining program integrity and detecting/deterring improper payments. This is known as the Public Assistance Reporting Information System (PARIS).

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Altarum, the HSD PARIS contractor, visited NM in April 2008 and provided technical assistance to develop a database and other reporting tools and filters to more efficiently manage the quarterly data match results. Now retired, OIG's Cindee Archuleta was instrumental in obtaining the technical assistance from Altarum.

According to Berna Quintana, Bureau Chief of the OIG's Restitutions Services Bureau, NM's PARIS database now has filters to make the data more usable for the department's purposes. An Excel spreadsheet was created to identify 'likely movers' out of the state of NM. Now, NM is now considered a 'model' state and staff were invited to present at a conference in March. "Stephanie Valdez, the PARIS Coordinator, represented HSD/OIG at the conference," said Quintana.

Besides matching SSN information from 49 states [minus Hawaii], as well as the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, for dual enrollees in public assistance programs, PARIS provides information on veterans receiving disability income and federal employee earnings and retirement. "This information, too, will be useful in ISD offices," said Quintana. It can also be used to give people who are not eligible for Medicaid access to health care programs already available to them through the VA or federal government. OIG is working with the Medical Assistance Division and ISD to make this information useful for the Department.

This new approach to ensuring ISD program integrity already looks promising: Using the most recent quarterly data, the PARIS team, that also includes Irene Romero, found 2,688 Interstate matches, 3,499 Veteran matches and 1,373 Federal matches. "It is estimated, based on Altarum's cost analysis, that HSD could potentially reduce or avoid improper payments resulting in an estimated \$3.7 million savings annually" said Quintana.

Four ISD county offices have been selected for the NM PARIS pilot that will begin in June 2009: Grant, NW Bernalillo, San Juan and West Doña Ana. Quintana hopes that after a successful pilot, they will begin providing spreadsheets to all ISD offices in September 2009.



OIG's PARIS Team, from left, Irene Romero, Berna Quintana and Stephanie Valdez.



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Happy Cínco de Mayo!