



## **Governor Bill Richardson Announces Comprehensive Statewide Health Initiatives to “Build a Healthy New Mexico”**

For Immediate Release  
October 15, 2004

Contact: Pahl Shipley  
505.476.2299

ROSWELL- Governor Bill Richardson today announced a package of comprehensive statewide health initiatives that will be a priority of the administration for the upcoming legislative session, and during the coming year. The Governor’s plan, called “Building a Healthy New Mexico”, includes strategies to address many of the state’s critical healthcare needs:

- A plan to reduce the number of New Mexicans, specifically working New Mexicans, who do not have health insurance,
- A plan to deal with the increasing problem of youth obesity and increase physical education programs in our schools,
- Immediate action to reduce the number of youth suicides and provide quality behavioral health services for youth in communities across the state, and
- A multi-faceted plan to help our senior citizens- making sure they get the prescription medicine they need, have food on their table, and are protected and safe if they require nursing home care.

“Improving the health of our citizens, expanding access to medical insurance and quality, affordable healthcare, and protecting our children and senior citizens is a priority for my administration,” said Governor Richardson. “Building a Healthier New Mexico will help make our families stronger, improve the quality of life for all our citizens, and help ensure our continued economic success.”

Here are Governor Richardson’s prepared remarks from a news conference today in Roswell:

### **Insure New Mexico**

“Today I am moving forward with my efforts to reduce the unacceptably high rate of New Mexicans without health insurance. The initiative I am announcing today targets working people without insurance, specifically finding ways, like group purchasing and

tax incentives, to help employers offer health insurance to their employees, and then encouraging those employees to sign up.

Yesterday I signed an executive order creating the *Insure New Mexico Council*. Lieutenant Governor Denish will chair the Council, which will consist of representatives from the insurance industry, small businesses, nonprofit organizations, and employees. I want them to give me realistic recommendations on how we can *decrease* the number of working people without insurance, and *increase* the number of employers offering insurance plans.

The problem is clear-

- 414,000 New Mexicans (22%) don't have health insurance,
- 70% of the uninsured are working people,
- Only 50% of small employers (under 50 employees) offer employer-sponsored insurance plans.

Why is it this bad? Three reasons -- cost, lack of knowledge about how to get health insurance for employees; and what I call the "hassle factor" of finding health insurance easily.

The uninsured are less likely to receive preventative health care and are more likely to develop chronic problems. They're more likely to miss work because of illness, hurting the productivity of companies. They are in a precarious position, and are at risk of being financially devastated by serious illness or other medical problems.

Last year, I created the Governor's Health Care Access and Coverage Task Force, and with the help of its members I proposed and passed several key pieces of legislation to expand access to affordable health insurance and healthcare. The initiatives I mentioned today will help us continue to move forward toward our goal of ensuring *every* New Mexican has access to affordable, quality healthcare.

### **Healthy Children**

I want to dramatically increase our efforts to protect the health of our school children and young people, and help them develop healthy lifestyles that will continue as they become adults.

Our children are facing a healthcare crisis in two primary areas that we will address in the upcoming session- **obesity, and youth suicide.**

#### **Obesity.**

We have a plan to reduce the number of seriously overweight young people by:

- Increasing the amount of time children in school spend daily on physical exercise and activity,

- Improving nutrition education, and reducing the number of non-nutritious food items available in schools, and
- Increasing the number of nutritious foods, such as fruits and vegetables, served in schools.

The problem is serious:

- In New Mexico, 17% of elementary students, 52% of middle school students, and 43% of high school students are overweight, and
- Chronic disease associated with obesity costs New Mexico more than 320-million dollars each year.

Our plan will help us create a culture of physical activity, nutrition, and healthy living in our young people that will help establish a lifetime of healthy habits.

### **Youth suicide.**

Any life lost to suicide, especially a young person, is a tragedy. We must talk about suicide and how to prevent it, to remove the stigma, address the causes and prevent these terrible tragedies from happening again.

Our plan will act to reduce the epidemic of youth suicide in New Mexico.

Recently I created the Youth Suicide Prevention Task Force. It's a multicultural group of family members, mental health care providers, advocates, and young people who will work together to develop strategies on how to prevent suicide and link these efforts to the schools. I've asked them to have their recommendations to me by December.

- NM's suicide rates are nearly twice the national rate, ranking fourth highest among the states.
- Suicide is the third leading cause of death among NM youth.

That is a tragedy, and I want to expand access to youth counseling and intervention services to help attack this problem.

### **School based health centers**

There is a system in place that puts healthcare and behavioral health services right where our kids are- in school – at a school based health center. While I am asking for separate recommendations and legislative actions for both Obesity and Youth Suicide - I want to say a few words about School Based Health Centers.

The 34 Department of Health-sponsored school based health centers in New Mexico are doing important work, but have been terribly underfunded. Therefore, one of my main priorities this legislative session will be to increase funding for existing centers, and allocate funding for 34 new sites and programs- **that will double the number of school based health centers in the state.**

School Based Health Centers are the key to success for many of our initiatives regarding Obesity, Youth Suicide, and Behavioral health services for teens, including peer counseling, and teen pregnancy. School is the place where all three critical relationships- teachers, children, and parents- can come together to have a powerful impact on a child or teen. They can work together to detect issues early, and provide the help, support, and intervention our children need.

Last year, we increased funding for health care services for Medicaid children in schools by 50% to over \$9 million. We increased the number of Medicaid children and adolescents served from 9500 to over 14,000. We still need to do more to reach additional kids and provide them better care.

### **Protecting and Supporting Senior Citizens**

I am keeping my promise to protect, and support our most vulnerable citizens- our seniors.

Too many of our elderly live in poverty, and struggle to pay their rent, buy food, and especially pay for prescription medicines and health care. Some are forced to choose between eating, and buying their medicines. I want to expand safety net programs to offer additional help to low-income seniors.

- **Medbank Emergency Assistance Program:** In cooperation with the New Mexico Medical Insurance Pool, my plan will offer vouchers worth up to \$300 for medications for people waiting to qualify for pharmaceutical companies' free prescription drug programs. An estimated 1,600 persons will receive emergency assistance with this initiative,
- **Expanding the use of Aging and Long-Term Services Department's existing Medbank program,** which simplifies the process of applying for free prescription drugs from pharmaceutical companies. Low-income seniors are guided through the complex process by Aging and Long-Term Services staff.
- **NM Medical Insurance Pool's Senior Pharmacy Plan** for people who do not qualify for low-income assistance from Medicare's discount prescription drug card. This program offers reasonable coverage at a reasonable cost to low-income seniors.

Another concern that is not talked about much but affects tens of thousands of New Mexicans everyday is **hunger**. Last year I convened the Governor's Hunger Summit to create a *Plan to End Hunger in New Mexico*, and formed The Task Force to End Hunger in New Mexico to work on solutions.

- Each week 54,000 New Mexicans visit pantries, shelters or soup kitchens in order to put food on the table—That’s called food insecurity and New Mexico has the highest rate in the nation. Seniors are particularly hard-hit.

The poorest of our elderly and disabled are eligible for food stamps, but because of federal rules, more than 6,000 of them receive just \$10 per month in food stamps. That is just not right.

- This session I will recommend that the state supplement the food stamp payment to *triple* the minimum amount to \$30 per month to help our elderly and disabled individuals put food on their tables.

## Nursing Homes

I promised **Zero Tolerance** for elderly abuse, and I am keeping that promise. To increase and expand our prevention efforts, I am proposing several new initiatives:

- **Expand the use of Granny Cams:** These monitoring devices serve as the eyes and ears of family members who cannot be with loved ones living in facilities. I propose to fund a loan bank that provides monitoring equipment (video or audio recorders) to residents of long term care facilities who cannot afford the costs. Recording devices serve as a deterrent to anyone who would consider harming or stealing from a resident and offer assurance to families that care is being provided,
- **Expand Zero Tolerance Team:** Fund elder abuse prosecutor, two investigators and two paralegals in the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program to increase enforcement activities against badly run facilities.

Through the intensive, combined efforts of the Departments of Health, Aging and Long Term Services, and Children, Youth, and Families, we have mounted an unprecedented effort to uncover and stop serious problems in our nursing homes.

- An undercover investigation over four months resulted in action against four nursing homes- two were closed, one now has a monitor in place, and the Department of Health is working to place a monitor in the fourth facility.
- The Department of Health is also investigating its own program- the Los Lunas Community Program. Secretary Grisham has even taken the unprecedented step of fining the department for its lack of oversight at the Los Lunas campus. The Departments of Health, Human Services, Taxation and revenue, and Aging are working together to go after nursing homes that abuse residents and fail to provide quality care.

I know these initiatives are ambitious, but I’m confident we can make them happen. Helping our citizens lead healthier lives is not a Democratic or Republican cause- it’s a New Mexico cause. Working together, I’m confident we can “Build a Healthy New Mexico.”