

Behavioral health service rolls up 30%, state says

By [Dan Boyd / Capitol Bureau Chief](#)

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SANTA FE – A New Mexico state agency that faced criticism last year for shaking up the state system that serves the mentally ill and substance abusers will tell legislators today that the number of people receiving behavioral health services increased by roughly 27,000 during the most recent budget year.

The 114,314 individuals who received behavioral health services during the 2014 budget year was up from 87,373 – a 30 percent increase – during the previous year, according to Human Services Department numbers.

The figure for the most recent budget year also represents an all-time high mark for the state, HSD spokesman Matt Kennicott said Tuesday. The data will be presented to the Legislative Finance Committee today.

“It shows the system is working and is capturing the people it’s intended to help,” Kennicott told the **Journal**.

The department spokesman also said the increase showed that last year’s overhaul of the behavioral health system caused no disruption in services.

However, Senate President Pro Tem Mary Kay Papen, D-Las Cruces, said Tuesday that she is not convinced.

Papen, who has criticized the Human Services Department’s handling of last year’s overhaul, questioned whether the agency might be enrolling more individuals at the expense of personalized services.

“Some of the things we’ve heard (from constituents) has not been commensurate with what they’re saying,” she said. “I don’t think we are getting better services.”

Papen said she might have more questions for top-ranking agency officials during today’s Legislative Finance Committee hearing at the state Capitol.

The number of people receiving behavioral health services decreased during the first half of the 2014 fiscal year, compared with the previous year, according to HSD figures, but the second half of the fiscal year – from January through June of this year – had a large spike, leading to the overall increase.

Kennicott attributed the overall increase to a combination of factors, including Gov. Susana Martinez's decision to expand Medicaid along with changes to how the state runs the joint federal-state health care programs.

Medicaid expansion meant accepting federal funds to extend coverage to adults making up to 138 percent of the federal poverty level. It took effect in January 2014.

However, Kennicott said, the increase wasn't limited to newly eligible adults but also included children and adults who had previously been eligible but had not received services.

In all, the roughly 27,000 increase during the 2014 budget year was much larger than that of any recent budget year. The number of New Mexicans receiving such services had increased by less than 14,000 during a five-year period leading up to last year, according to HSD data.

The figures were based on both Medicaid billings and an HSD census conducted after last year's overhaul, Kennicott said.

In June 2013, the Human Services Department cut off Medicaid funding to 15 New Mexico nonprofit providers, alleging that an audit showed overbilling and possible fraud. Twelve of the nonprofits were replaced by five Arizona companies.

The crackdown has led to an ongoing debate over whether client services were interrupted, with the Martinez administration insisting they were not.

Attorney General Gary King's office is investigating possible fraud on the part of the 15 providers, after being referred the audit findings. Two providers have been cleared, while investigations into the others are pending.

King's office has successfully fought in court to keep the audit report from being released, arguing that its investigation could be jeopardized by making the audit public.