

New Mexico Coalition for Literacy



Supporting community-based adult literacy programs since 1987

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Thursday, August 20, 2020

STATEWIDE LITERACY COALITION LOSES DECADES-OLD FUNDING:

NEW MEXICO ADULT LITERACY AT RISK

Santa Fe – Operations of a 33-year old New Mexico institution, the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy (NMCL), will likely cease on September 30 if no additional funding is secured to replace a sudden loss of State funding provided by the New Mexico Higher Education Department (NMHED) for the past four years, and by the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs/State Library in the twenty-five years preceding. This funding has been provided by the New Mexico State Legislature's General Fund to NMCL for its statewide adult literacy program over the past three decades.

First Lady Katherine Carruthers developed a statewide system of literacy programs in 1987 as a response to public concern over the staggering low literacy rates for adults in the state of New Mexico and formed the NMCL as an outcome of this effort. Politicians and business leaders commonly consider these low literacy rates as one of several main factors contributing to difficulties attracting higher paying jobs to New Mexico, and thus keeps tax revenues at low levels per capita.

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NMCL and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) serve adults who read and write below the sixth grade level or who speak a language other than English in need of survival English skills in the home, workplace, school, and life. These CBOs serve adults with literacy and language barriers to employment, health, and civic participation that are only exacerbated due to the global pandemic; they do not have the technology to keep up with their education, participate in the Census, or vote in the election due to their limited literacy and language skills.

In July, the NMHED awarded monies earmarked by the Legislature to be used statewide for adult literacy programs to four entities mostly backstopped by the Colleges and Universities, which the Department already oversees. In doing so, the Department ignored a network of Community-Based Organizations, which currently provide adult literacy services statewide from communities in the Southwestern, Eastern, and Northern parts of the State, including the capital city of Santa Fe and nearby Moriarty. The entire Southern part of New Mexico has been largely unsupported by HED funding intended for the hardest to serve and most vulnerable populations from rural regions.

The impact of the HED's recent action will be felt throughout the state. Without additional external donations, NMCL will most likely cease operations. Besides the loss of the statewide coordinating entity, many rural Community-Based Organizations will also shutter their doors, leaving many of New Mexico's rural students completely abandoned and unable to progress further with literacy training. In addition to NMCL adult-learning students, current literacy volunteers will be deprived of their ability to help their communities.

According to the American Institutes for Research, estimates of adult literacy and numeracy proficiency in all U.S. states and counties show that *New Mexico ranks 49th in literacy nation-wide with its average scale score barely outpacing Louisiana. However, New Mexico is the least literate state when considering Literacy Level 1, falling just*

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behind California and Texas, likely due to language barriers¹ and other factors. In New Mexico, 29% of adults function at literacy Level 1; 31% at Level 2; and 39% at Level 3². By contrast, the most literate state is New Hampshire with 11% of adults at Level 1 compared to 22% nation-wide. New Mexico can ill-afford to lose its statewide voice for literacy at this crucial time in New Mexico's history.

The following is a statement from Heather Heunermund, longtime Executive Director of the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy, the lead New Mexico adult literacy statewide organization for over the past thirty years:

“We are shocked and concerned for NMCL and its programs due to this sudden loss of funding, especially now that the fall semester is underway with no clear end in sight to the pandemic fallout. The path to recovery is not clear without this essential educational support for adult literacy programs. As children and their parents begin the school year in need of access to hardware, software, and Internet, the digital divide will greatly separate those families who have access to resources from those who do not, leaving New Mexico's most vulnerable populations behind as the State approaches recovery. This is the antithesis of a civil society. We need funding so literacy and language services may continue with these end goals in mind. We had plans to serve the entire state with distance instruction through COVID-19 safe practices for individual learning. Today's jobs require literacy skills beyond the basic level and there will remain an increased demand for literacy services, a demand that went largely unmet prior to the crisis that has only been magnified because of it.”

The HED action effectively consolidated funding for adult literacy support predominantly within the Rio Grande corridor, focused on Albuquerque, while failing to account for the rural parts of the state where illiteracy is statistically most concentrated. Significant

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¹ The average scores and proficiency levels include the literacy-related non-respondents (adults whose English language skills were too low to participate in the study) whereas the previous PIAAC estimates exclude them.

² Detail may not sum due to totals due to rounding.

infrastructure exists within the metropolitan areas, including charter schools for adult learners, which are funded already through the Public Education Department. The actions of the HED results in additional subsidies to the University of New Mexico system, San Juan College and the Gordon Bernell Charter School.

The NMCL began as an effort to gain support through the State Legislature for modest operating expense grants, outreach/public relations, education, training, and technical assistance to Community-Based Organizations (CBOs). It has grown in both stature and capacity to support New Mexico's adult literacy initiatives all while maintaining a small and efficient staff of three.

To schedule an interview with NMCL or a local CBO impacted by this major funding loss, email info@newmexicoliteracy.org or call 1-800-233-7587.

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The NMCL is a private, nonprofit corporation serving the entire State of New Mexico. To schedule an interview; donate; volunteer as a tutor; or refer a potential student, call the NMCL's adult literacy hotline at 1-800-233-7587, which is proudly sponsored by KOAT-TV, Channel 7. You may also email info@newmexicoliteracy.org; visit <http://www.newmexicoliteracy.org>; or visit NMCL's social media pages @NMAdultLiteracy.