

[https://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/education/st-johns-announces-initiatives-to-address-post-covid-mental-health-crisis/article\\_00d89f2c-8cd3-11ef-abfd-4790babe830d.html](https://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/education/st-johns-announces-initiatives-to-address-post-covid-mental-health-crisis/article_00d89f2c-8cd3-11ef-abfd-4790babe830d.html)

## St. John's announces initiatives to address post-COVID mental health crisis

By André Salkin [asalkin@sfnewmexican.com](mailto:asalkin@sfnewmexican.com)

Oct 29, 2024

1 of 3



Malcolm Morgan-Petty speaks with sophomores Andrea Campagna and Scarlett Smith on planning for an event, Reality in N while sitting at The Tabernacle, a student-built hangout at St. John's College, on Monday.

Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

St. John's College has a unique approach to the college experience: Professors are "tutors"; there's a 7-to-1 ratio of tutors to students; and there's a focus on getting students into nature.

[Privacy](#) - [Terms](#)

Still, the small liberal arts school hasn't been able to shield its students from the effects of a global slump in mental health, predominantly for young people.

That's why the private college is drawing on \$68 million in federal funds to "promote suicide prevention and address the U.S. mental health crisis" as part of President Joe Biden's Unity Agenda.

A three-year, \$306,000 grant from the fund to St. John's Santa Fe campus will pay for a new position — a "prevention manager" charged with coordinating mental health initiatives across departments, with a focus on substance use disorder prevention and recovery.

The college has been steadily beefing up mental health services since the pandemic.

"We've ridden the same wave that I think all of higher education has," said St. John's President J. Walter Sterling, new to the role this year. "My own sense as the president and before, as the dean, is that we saw patterns that are familiar across all of higher education; there are more students coming with needs for counseling services and other forms of support."

The trend is consistent with 2023 data from the World Health Organization showing youth mental health was hit disproportionately hard by COVID-19 — the number of people ages 18 to 29 with mental health problems has doubled since the start of the pandemic.

But youth mental health was on the decline before that — something Sterling said has been worsening for "10 to 15 years," prompted by the arrival of the smartphone and the 24-hour news cycle.

"You can view it as reactive management of folks in crisis," he said, "or you can try to pivot into: 'How do we think holistically about student flourishing, prevention, health and wellness?'"

One of those holistic solutions sends students outdoors.

St. John's has a program that offers students an opportunity to borrow camping, rock climbing and skiing equipment from a ready-to-go supply, largely funded by a grant the college received in 2023.

"They use that time to really connect with nature and, I would say, to just decompress, said Malcom Morgan-Petty, associate director of student engagement. "It's meant to give students time out in the wilderness to connect with nature, to disconnect from technology, to really learn things — purifying water, how to build a campfire, leaving no trace."

Morgan-Petty supervises the campus' student groups and student government, ensuring they have the resources they need, that they remain inclusive and that they have the opportunity to work with local community partners.

He also oversees the school's Spectrum club, an LGBTQ+ support group in which he takes a support role in students' mental health.

"I work with some queer students one on one," Morgan-Petty said, "as they're having issues of coming out or dealing with family issues of being understood or accepted for who they are — as they are discovering who they are here in college."

"Malcom is an amazing resource. He's almost like a therapist," said Iván Torres, 19, a St. John's sophomore who was raised in Rio Rancho.

Morgan-Petty is a much-needed support line, Torres added, because the school has only three on-site therapists to serve 471 students, and "it's incredibly hard actually getting into those therapists at the beginning of the year."

Plus, not all students have the time or interest to "run off and go camping in the woods," Torres said. He cited a "disconnect between the services we have and whether they're actually successful for many students in helping them process sort of everything that can happen at a college."

He said he believes the school should be prioritizing direct on-campus counseling services.

School officials said Academic Live Care — a free online tool linking students with medical doctors, therapists and psychiatrists — offers help to students who can't fit into the busy schedules of the three on-site therapists.

But Torres said he doesn't know of any students who have received consistent therapy through the online service.

He noted, "There's plenty of private therapists that don't accept insurance, but that's not financially feasible for many people that are working class here or for those that don't have cars."

The problem of too few accessible therapists isn't limited to St. John's campus.

According to a 2021 report from the National Alliance on Mental Illness, over half of New Mexico residents live in communities without adequate mental health practitioner coverage.

The same report showed New Mexicans are 1.5 times more likely to be forced out of network for mental health care than for primary care — leaving over a third of adults to forgo mental health treatment due to the costs.

Those obstacles to treatment are part of the reason why New Mexico ranks fourth in the nation for its suicide death rate, according to 2022 numbers from the CDC.

“I think we're in a regressive state,” Torres said, “not necessarily in our state of New Mexico but nationally. We're regressive in how we see people, how we support people, how we value people.”

### Takeaways

- St. John's College's Santa Fe campus has announced it has received a \$306,000 grant to fund three years of a new “prevention manager,” charged with coordinating the campus' mental health initiatives with a focus on substance abuse prevention and recovery.
- The grant, which is funded by money from the Biden administration to support mental health and suicide prevention, is one of multiple initiatives undertaken in the wake of COVID and its disproportionate effect on the mental health of younger people.
- One student shared concerns about the role, saying the college is disconnected with students' mental health needs, citing the 3 on-site therapists to counsel the school's 471 students.

---

**André Salkin**

Education Reporter