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## Longtime executive director of Santa Fe's Sky Center prepares to step down

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By Margaret O'Hara mohara@sfnewmexican.com

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Apryl Miller, left, who has served as executive director of Santa Fe's Sky Center for about 30 years, and Marisol Peña, who will now take on the role, shown Wednesday at the center's Gratitude Forest. Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

Keeping kids connected to their families and communities is crucial, says Apryl Miller, the longtime executive director of Santa Fe's Sky Center.

She describes this bond between people as a potentially lifesaving “stickiness.”

“We know that something like suicide or depression, these are isolating experiences that can worsen with isolation,” Miller said. “We are trying to create a little stickiness between kids and those people who love them, so that together, collectively, they are addressing issues and solving issues.”

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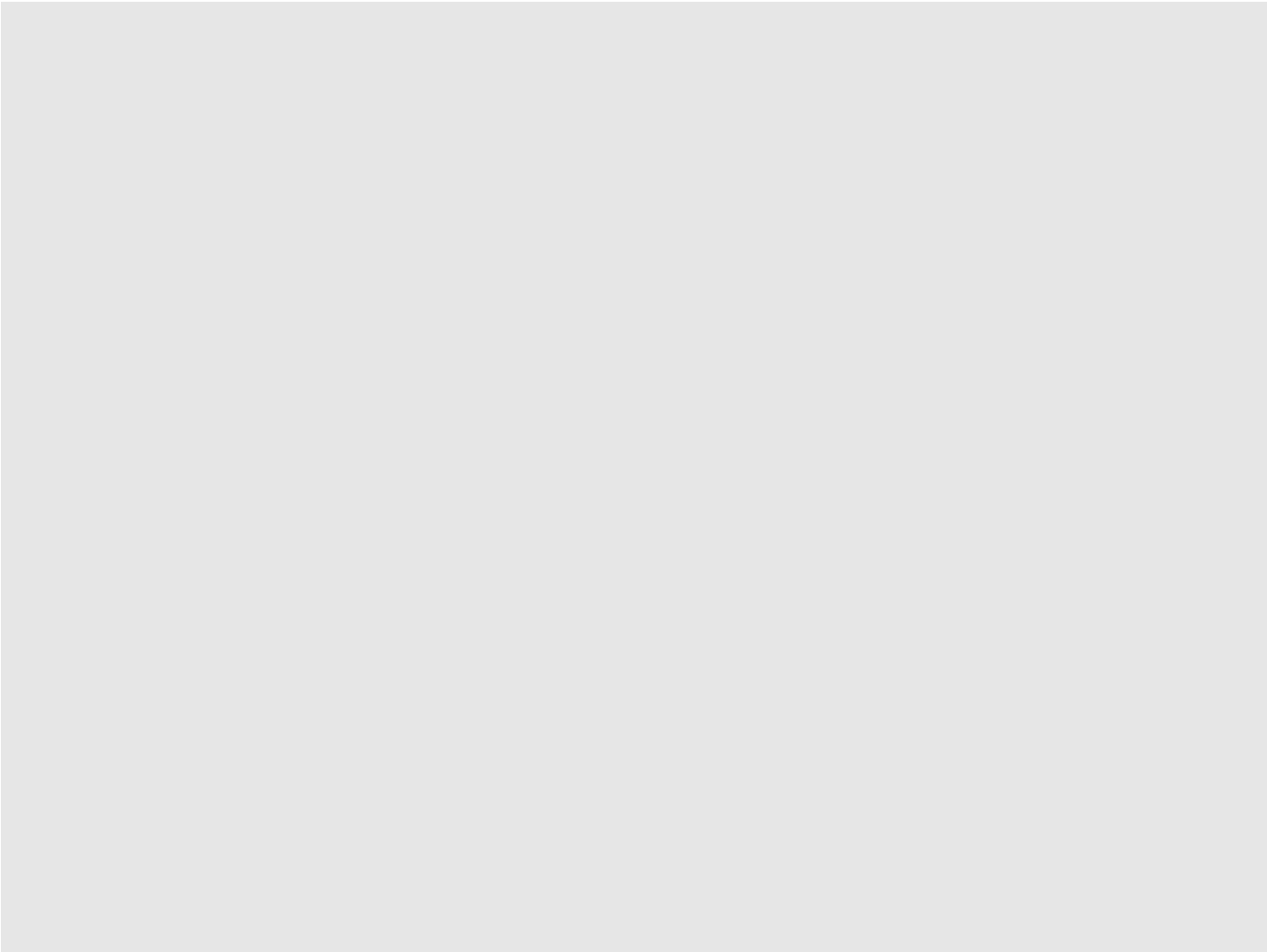
Miller has served for 30 years in the top spot at the Sky Center, based at Ortiz Middle School. It's the primary hub for the New Mexico Suicide Intervention Project, which provides suicide prevention and response services while training graduate students for careers in mental health.

She is stepping away from the role, and Marisol Peña, the Sky Center's associate director, will take over Tuesday.

But the center's “sticky stuff” won't disappear, Peña said. The organization's programs — which include family counseling, crisis response after a traumatic event, and peer-to-peer and support groups for youth — will remain the same.

Peña said she could imagine adding more staff to the center or expanding its reach, but she'll stick with Miller's practice of “slow and deep” growth over time.

“It's hard for me to imagine myself anywhere else, other than the Sky Center. ... I feel lucky and fortunate to be where I'm at, and also I feel lucky enough to be able to support others that come in with with difficult things,” Peña said.



Handwritten messages from clients at Santa Fe's Sky Center are part of its Gratitude Forest. The center is the primary hub for the New Mexico Suicide Intervention Project, which provides suicide prevention and response services while training graduate students for careers in mental health.

Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

## 'Twofold mission'

When Miller started working with the New Mexico Suicide Intervention Project, there was no Sky Center.

A licensed clinical social worker, she was hired in 1996 by the project, then a group of citizens concerned about the high number of New Mexico youth dying by suicide.

The issue persists today: Like many states in the Mountain West, New Mexico has one of the highest overall suicide rates in the nation. The latest data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows the state has the fourth highest suicide rate in the U.S., with 24.7 deaths by suicide per 100,000 people in 2022.

While the 2023 New Mexico Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey showed some progress — adolescent mental health improved after eight years of consistently worsening — data from the survey indicate more than a third of New Mexico students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness.

After joining the Suicide Intervention Project, Miller set her sights on establishing a center for no-cost counseling for families, with flexible scheduling to allow for evening appointments and no complications from billing insurance.

“I cared a lot, kind of putting into action the idea that behavioral health would be accessible,” she said.

Meanwhile, the center would serve as a training ground for graduates pursuing careers in behavioral health, who must complete supervised work in the field prior to licensure.

Providing both services became the Sky Center’s initial “twofold mission” when it opened its doors in January 1998, Miller said.

In the years since, the Sky Center — funded through individual donations and private and local government grants, with no federal funding at risk of being pulled — has expanded its programs for youth, setting up free school support groups and Natural Helpers, a peer-helping-peer prevention program that teaches kids how to interrupt bullying and advance kindness in their school communities.

In the past academic year, the center served about 1,500 clients.

The center was also one of the founding organizations of the Northern New Mexico Postvention Team, which responds to school communities in the aftermath of a young person's sudden death, often by suicide. The Sky Center's postvention work, Miller said, is similar to showing up at a grieving loved one's door with a casserole: "You've had quite an upset. Let us see if we can help manage some of the grief."

Sky Center staff members have also mentored dozens of new counselors and social workers. They're set to train 16 new behavioral health workers during the upcoming school year.

"They are the behavioral health clinicians of the future, which we desperately need," Miller said.

She added, "The need so far outweighs the number of providers. We all know that if we're just trying to get a dental appointment or a health care appointment — but when it comes to behavioral health, that's just unacceptable. You cannot have a waitlist when you have a 15-year-old who's talking about suicide."

## 'Seamless' transition

Many "Sky alums," as Miller called them, still practice in Santa Fe and in New Mexico. They now work in local schools, hospitals and organizations.

Peña also completed her internship at the Sky Center — though she started working at the center well before that.

Peña was first hired by the organization as a Spanish interpreter in 2014, after earning her bachelor's degree in social work at New Mexico Highlands University. From there, she stayed with the organization as an office assistant, then an office manager.

After a push from Miller, she returned to Highlands to pursue her master's degree. Upon graduating and completing the internship and licensure requirements, Peña stepped into the role of associate director as a licensed master social worker.

Peña and Miller have spent the past year getting ready for the leadership change.

"We have prepared for this in a way that we want — especially [for] the kids and families we serve — for it to be seamless," Miller said.

“The motto, I think, is supporting one another. ... It’s not an, ‘I got this,’ it’s a ‘We got this,’ ” said Peña, who grew up in Española.

Miller, meanwhile, isn’t quite sure what life will be like after she steps away — but she said she’s looking forward to it.

“I’m sure I’ll keep my fingers involved in the community,” she said.

## How to get help

*If you or someone you know has thoughts of suicide, call one of the following hotlines, staffed 24 hours a day, to get help:*

National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: call or text 988 or chat at [988Lifeline.org](https://988lifeline.org).

New Mexico Crisis and Access Line: 855-662-7474 (855-NMCRISIS).

For detailed information about suicide prevention, visit [sprc.org](https://sprc.org).

*The following local organizations offer crisis response services, counseling, peer support and other suicide prevention efforts for youth and their families:*

The Sky Center/New Mexico Suicide Intervention Project, based at Ortiz Middle School, 505-473-6191, [skycenter.nmsip.org](https://skycenter.nmsip.org).

Gerard’s House, 505-424-1800, [gerardshouse.org](https://gerardshouse.org).

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**Apryl Miller**

The Sky Center executive director

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Margaret O'Hara

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