

## NEWS

# Las Cruces legislator helping fight childhood trauma

**Steve Jansen** Youth Today

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LAS CRUCES - With some time to kill the day before the 2018 Thanksgiving break, William Soules, a math and social studies teacher at Oñate High School in Las Cruces, N.M., taught a group of about 30 advanced placement psychology students about Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs. The landmark national research study, published in 1998, was the largest investigation into how child abuse and neglect manifests into adult health and well-being.

“I thought it would be a good discussion,” New Mexico state Sen. Soules, a Democrat, recalled. “These are AP kids so they must be doing well.”

He gave them the 10-question ACEs survey and showed a video about the long-term health consequences of early childhood trauma. As he tallied the anonymous results, he was shocked to discover that about 60% had two or more ACEs. According to a 2018 Child Trends report, an average of 11% of children, from birth to age 17, experienced two ACEs nationally.

Equally if not more concerning: A couple of Soules’ students said they had been subjected to nine and 10 (out of 10) ACEs. Child Trends statistics show that 18% of New Mexico’s kids had three to eight ACEs, which is nearly double the national average.

“Instead of a discussion,” Soules said, “it became more of a therapy session, with students saying, ‘If we’ve known about [ACEs] for more than 20 years, why hasn’t anybody done anything about it? How come the adults allowed this to happen?’”

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Katherine Ortega Courtney and Dominic Cappello, co-founders of the Anna, Age Eight Institute, along with advisers such as Soules, are trying to do something about it. The Santa Fe nonprofit hopes to bring data-informed solutions to all the state’s 33 counties. The fixes, they say, can lead to fewer instances of child abuse and neglect, which could lead to fewer

kids in state systems such as foster care. The financially modest organization, which received more money during the 2020 Legislature but not as much as they had hoped, recently published its first comprehensive report, which looks at ACEs for Doña Ana County residents.

## **Funding began in 2019**

Before the institute got off the ground, Courtney and Cappello, who both previously worked at the state Children, Youth and Families Department, self-published “Anna, Age Eight: The Data-Driven Prevention of Childhood Trauma and Maltreatment.” The January 2018 book asserts that public health workers, equipped with sturdy data and trauma-informed training, can help combat ACEs in a child’s life. (The book is available for a free download on their website.)

“It wasn’t part of our jobs ... our intention was to improve CYFD, but what we found was when we started researching solutions, we realized that the solution isn’t up to CYFD. It’s really the entire community being resourced to support families,” Courtney said.

After the book came out, Cappello connected with Las Cruces City Council Member Kasandra Gandara, who wanted to implement ACEs surveys for Doña Ana County’s youth and adults. But there wasn’t any money to fund the initiative.

That changed once Soules read the book and gave the survey to his AP psychology class. During the 2019 state legislative session, he procured a \$1.1 million appropriation, with half of that amount recurring, to start the Anna, Age Eight Institute. The organization, backed by leaders such as Rick Bailey, president of Northern New Mexico College in Española, officially launched in July 2019.

“It’s a direct spinoff from what happened in that class,” Soules said. He remembers hearing an audible gasp from the students when the narrator in the video said that the life expectancy of someone with six or more ACEs is shortened by 20 years. Courtney added, “If AP students are struggling that much, you really worry about the ones who aren’t in AP classes.”

The basic ACEs survey is straightforward. It asks, “To what degree can you access ten vital ‘surviving’ and ‘thriving’ services?” The surviving services include food assistance, housing, health care, behavioral health and public transportation while thriving services encompass parental supports, early childhood learning programs, in-school behavioral and physical health services, youth mentors and job training.

In December 2019, the institute, together with Las Cruces partners including New Mexico State University (which heads the data collection for Anna, Age Eight) and Resilience Leaders of Doña Ana County, published ACEs results that measured the ability of Doña Ana County families to access services.

The outcomes that especially stood out to Courtney: 66% said they had difficulty accessing housing services while 49% experienced roadblocks to obtaining behavioral health services. (There were a total of 1,226 survey respondents.)

“We really need to address the survival services because if kids don’t have access to secure housing and food, they’re not going to thrive in school,” he said. Socorro and Rio Arriba counties and Taos Pueblo have also completed surveys, with results forthcoming.

The nonprofit hopes that every New Mexico county jumps on board with data collection in an attempt to thwart ACEs before they happen — and potentially save the state millions by avoiding additional placements into foster care or juvenile justice.

Soules sponsored Senate Bill 35 during the 2020 Legislature in an attempt to procure an additional \$6 million subsidy for the institute, but the measure didn’t make it out of committee. Instead, Soules and Courtney said, the organization will receive \$400,000 in new recurring money from the \$7.6 billion general appropriations bill (House Bill 2) as well as the annual \$400,000 from the original act approved by lawmakers in 2019.

“We already spend a lot of money dealing with drug abuse, corrections within CYFD, child abuse and things that are the direct result of not having dealt with them on the front end,” Soules said. “[The Anna, Age Eight Institute] is the one place in the state budget where there’s a real focus on prevention rather than on reacting to what has already happened.”

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