New nonprofit Imagine New Mexico aims to tackle health care, education, other issues

Santa Fe resident Steve Moise is one of the founders of Imagine New Mexico, a new nonprofit that is trying to improve issues in New Mexico such as health care and education.

When it comes to achieving progress, Steve Moise, one of the founders of the new nonprofit Imagine New Mexico, understands he and his associates likely couldn't have picked a more imposing list of target issues.

"This is a monumental undertaking," said Moise, a retired lawyer and former New Mexico state investment officer. "So, we're not going to rush it."

Imagine New Mexico's leaders describe it as an organization dedicated to delivering measurable progress on five areas in which the state traditionally has landed near the bottom in national rankings: health care, education, economic growth, poverty reduction and public safety.

To achieve that, the organization plans to focus on a collaborative model while employing a public dashboard to chart its success.

Imagine New Mexico will not take on any direct initiatives — "We want people to understand we're not here to duplicate what any other group is doing," Moise said — but will offer financial rewards to other nonprofits that work together to address some of the state's most vexing problems.

It has been funded by a handful of private donors and foundations, he said, adding the organization does not and will not accept government funding.

Its funding has been limited so far, and Moise said almost all of it has gone toward creating the data dashboard. But he is expecting additional donations.

Imagine New Mexico has no executive director, and Moise said he isn't sure when it will; he and co-founder Mark Benak are filling that role in the meantime.

He has been encouraged by the reception Imagine New Mexico has gotten from the donor community.

"I have not felt skepticism," Moise said. "It surprises me because I expected to. But people have embraced the concept."

A well-rounded board

Moise founded the organization with his friend Benak, former CEO of Asset Performance Technologies and chair of the Sandia Foundation; and former state Treasurer Doug Brown, now the chair of the University of New Mexico Board of Regents. The three men serve on the Imagine New Mexico board with other notable figures, including Alicia Keyes, former state Cabinet secretary of economic development and the founder of Apaluma, a company that builds and standardizes data sets for all government data; Notah Begay III, a PGA Tour golfer and founder of the Notah Begay III Foundation; and Christina Campos, a longtime rural hospital administrator and now a UNM regent.

Moise said he has been interested in tackling such issues on the state's behalf since moving to New Mexico in the early 1970s. But it wasn't until he retired a year and a half ago that he felt like he had the time to devote to the effort.

The last thing he, Benak and Brown wanted to do was form a nonprofit, he said, adding, "I am familiar with an excessive number of nonprofits, and I didn't want to add to it."

But as their idea began to take shape, they realized the nonprofit route was the only realistic path.

Still, Moise pictures the launch of Imagine New Mexico in another light.

"It's an entrepreneurial adventure," he said. "It's like starting a new business."

Moise and his associates have borrowed elements and practices from other like-minded organizations around the country, but the overall model is unique, he believes.

"We've taken those parts to put together the model we're using," Moise said. "We think this is something worth pursuing, but we don't know if it's ever been tried anywhere."

Moise said the idea is to get other nonprofits out of their silos and working together, all while charting their progress in real time in a public format via a data dashboard posted on the Imagine New Mexico website at imaginenewmexico.org.

"We're going to challenge three to five nonprofits, well-respected nonprofits, to work together to improve those indicators," Moise said. "They can select the ones to start with, then we'll move on to other areas of focus."

The data dashboard represents a critical part of that effort, he said.

"It is the most important element of what we're doing," Moise said.

A data dashboard posted on the Imagine New Mexico website at imaginenewmexico.org is aimed at tracking nonprofits' progress in tackling key issues in the state.

Who can build it?

Just finding someone capable of building that tool was a big job, he said, explaining Imagine New Mexico unsuccessfully approached several organizations with the idea for the dashboard before finding the Prevention Research Center at the UNM School of Medicine.

The center's Rebecca Kilburn met with Moise and was enthusiastic about the challenge, he said. Imagine New Mexico contracted with the center to build the dashboard, and Kilburn and her team of data analysts put it together.

"We've been really pleased with what they've done," Moise said.

Imagine New Mexico is not taking on all five public policy issues at once, he said, choosing instead to tackle them one at a time.

Health care was the natural first choice.

The Prevention Research Center staff developed a list of four key indicators it will use to measure progress on that issue, including the number of New Mexicans who were unable to get medical care because of the cost, the number of New Mexicans who

experienced preventable hospital stays, those who have had a routine checkup within the last year and the size of the physician workforce in the state.

Each of those indicators is then broken down across four categories — education, economy, poverty and crime — with each of those categories diced up even further.

It's all very wonkish, but Moise believes the dashboard will provide the best perspective yet on how New Mexico fares compared to the rest of the country and what programs it is using that are effective at improving its status.

The approach is experimental, he acknowledged, and if something doesn't work, he and the other board members will be happy to toss it out and try something else.

"This is a test," Moise said. "Our entire model is going to evolve. We're creating something new."

The organization will go wherever the data leads.

"We want to consistently disrupt the status quo by providing data to effect positive change," he said.