

# Cooking Together To Support Children With Feeding Difficulties

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## Background

Feeding problems are estimated to occur in 20-45% of typically developing children worldwide, where 80-90% of children and adults with developmental disorders will have feeding and swallowing problems at some point in their life. In the United States, more than one in 37 American children under the age of five annually receive a diagnosis of, and currently have, a pediatric feeding disorder (PFD). Some conditions that contribute to this statistic are Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), sensory processing disorder, and behavior difficulties. To support children with PFD, the University of New Mexico Hospital started the SAFE (Supports and Assessment for Feeding and Eating) pediatric clinic. It provides feeding assessments that focus on behavioral feeding issues, oral motor function, positioning, adaptive equipment, food textures, health screening, and nutrition/diet analysis. An issue we have come across is the gap between receipt of recommendations from SAFE clinic and initiation of feeding therapy or other management from speech-language pathologists (SLPs). Due to limited resources within the state, some families have experienced long waitlists or no availabilities with SLPs especially those living in more rural parts of New Mexico.

## Objectives

- Help patients evaluated at the SAFE clinic during the gap between receipt of recommendations and initiation of services from speech-language pathologists (SLPs) through the distribution of cookbooks and recipes
- Encourage visual exposure to foods along with sensory play in the form of meal preparation in those with pediatric feeding disorders and other feeding problems

## Methods

We used the Medical Home Portal website to assess the available resources for feeding evaluation and feeding therapy in New Mexico. To look into other contributing barriers to access, we reviewed data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the 2020 Statewide Community Health Needs Assessment conducted by UNM hospital. Lastly, we spoke with community partners such as Dr. Thomas Faber, CATCH grant facilitator, and Karen Armitage, president, of the New Mexico Pediatric Society.

We conducted a literature review on the effectiveness of meal preparation and sensory play with food in improving feeding problems.

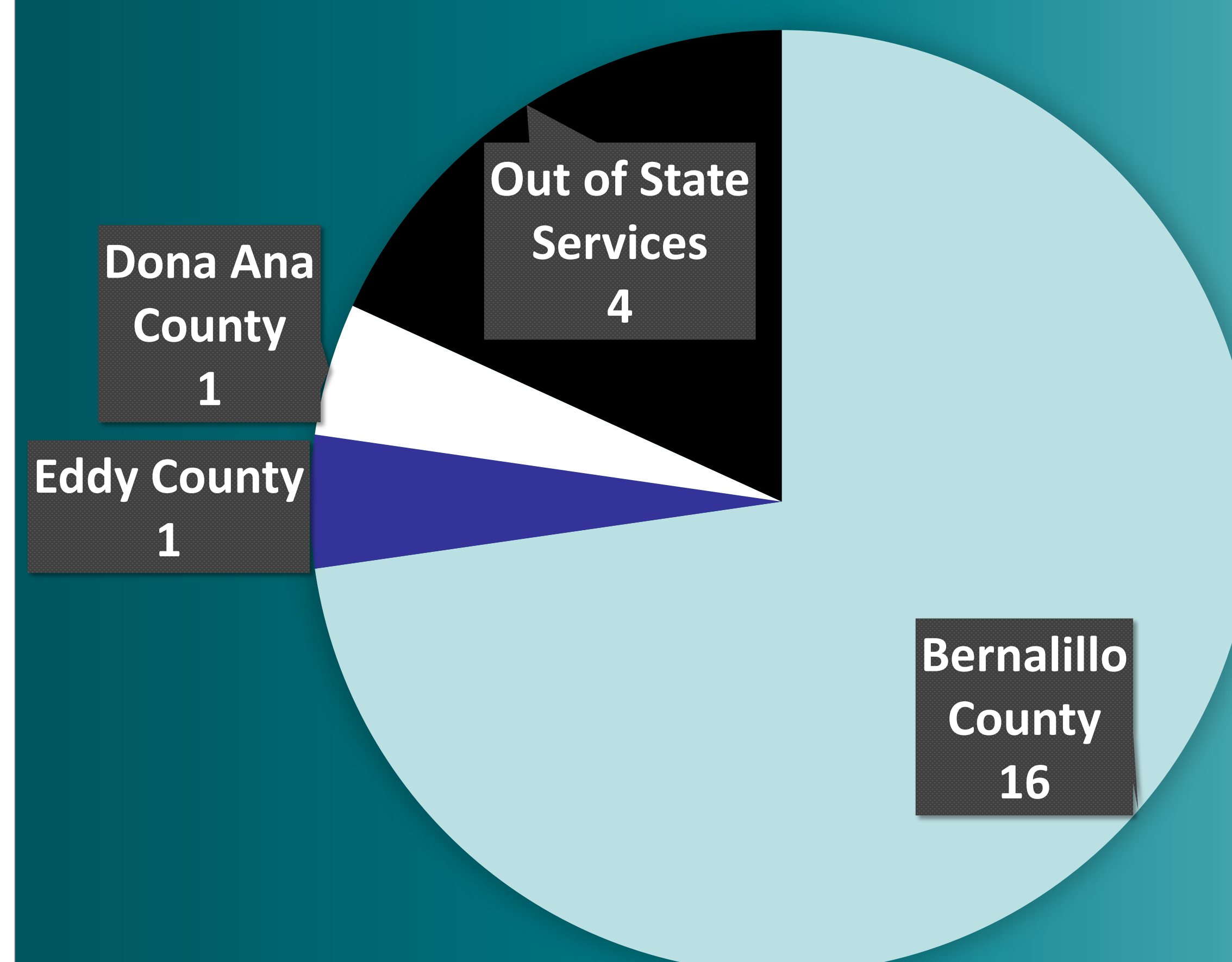
## Results

Our research into the available resources showed that the University of New Mexico Hospital's SAFE clinic is the only listed specialized pediatric clinic for swallowing disorder/dysphagia. Twenty-two speech-language pathologist clinics are listed for New Mexico. However, 4 out of the 22 are centrally located out of state, but included because they are listed to have services nationwide. Of the remaining 18, 16 are located in Albuquerque (Bernalillo county), 1 in Las Cruces (Dona Ana County), and 1 in Artesia (Eddy County). Of note, not all of these listed clinics provide feeding therapy which limits resources even further for those with feeding difficulties.

New Mexico was shown to have a poverty rate in 2021 of 19.1% – the third highest in the country and well above the national poverty rate of 13.4%, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The rate is even higher for New Mexico's children: 28% of children under age 5 live in poverty and 25% of children under age 18 live in poverty.

Our review on relevant literature showed positive results where sensory play with food can increase a child's willingness to try new foods and textures. For example, one study involving 12 UK preschools found that children were willing to try a new vegetable if they were exposed to a story about that vegetable. This result was even truer for those who had exposure to a story and sensory play related to that vegetable. [Nekitsking, 2019]

## Feeding Therapy Services in New Mexico



## Discussion

There are a total of 33 counties in New Mexico so the distribution of available speech language pathology services noted in our results section. demonstrates the barrier in access statewide especially for children living in more rural parts of New Mexico. This is compounded by the level of poverty found in New Mexico especially in the pediatric population. Our project hopes to address these barriers by providing resources to use while awaiting services. It empowers families to have a feasible way to provide support for children with feeding difficulties sooner rather than waiting months before getting any type of assistance. We hypothesize the project will encourage positive food experiences for children with PFD. We also believe it will have a positive impact on underserved children with PFD by making these resources free, culturally diverse, and accommodating for different levels of literacy. It will also be sustainable and easily generalized as these measures can be done at home. We plan to fund and carry out our project by applying for the CATCH grant in the fall of 2023.

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