

# Safe Streets funds sit unused, go where less needed

## Places with most deaths lack resources to apply

**Austin Fast**

USA TODAY

Elaborate descansos line highways and streets across New Mexico, memorials honoring lives lost. Here, where the pedestrian death rate has led the nation for six years in a row, families go far be-

yond a simple white cross. They add photos, tend colorful flowers, hang holiday decorations — and state lawmakers have made it a criminal offense to deface them.

In New Mexico's remote northwest corner, these memorials stand watch over the multilane freeways that twist their way from the Navajo Nation and other tribal lands into the small city of Gallup. It's exactly the type of disadvantaged place the Biden administration

promised would benefit from a massive influx of federal money for safer streets. McKinley County is poor and home to Native communities often left out of such programs.

But two years into the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law's rollout, many places like Gallup have received little help even as millions go unused, a USA TODAY investigation found. In the \$5 billion Safe Streets and Roads for All program, most of the money doled out

so far has gone to more affluent counties with lower fatality rates.

That's because the grants are structured to reward communities that already have the resources to pursue the funding: Detroit, for example, with an 18-member grant writing staff that has raked in nearly \$50 million to improve its streets. Or Montclair Township, New Jersey, a wealthy New York City suburb

**See SAFE STREETS, Page 4A**

# Safe Streets

Continued from Page 1A

where citizens have demanded solutions from elected leaders. It got about \$440,000.

Gallup, with no dedicated grant writer, where public meetings on transportation last year drew little interest, never even asked for the money.

Crash records show they could certainly use it.

The average American county sees slightly more than one pedestrian killed per 100,000 residents each year, according to USA TODAY's analysis of five years of federal data. For McKinley County, it's nearly 11 per 100,000.

Screaming train whistles punctuate life there as mile-long trains barrel along one of America's busiest freight routes. The switchyard runs parallel to New Mexico's primary east-west interstate, creating a half-mile-wide chasm for pedestrians between Gallup's historic downtown and the newer stores and restaurants on the other side.

Rather than take a long walk around, some locals clamber over the tracks and dash across four lanes of 65 mph traffic. Stronger fences or a pedestrian bridge could have kept Jeremiah Begay, 23, from doing that in 2016. He was killed when two tractor-trailers struck him on the highway around sunset.

Years of underfunding mean many sidewalks are narrow and poorly maintained, if there at all, and center lines and crosswalks have weathered away on many streets. A simple coat of fresh paint or flashing lights might have prevented Navajo elder Benson Daniels' death in 2021 when a van struck him in a faded crosswalk at a busy intersection.

His 26-year-old niece, Brandy Grenier, wishes someone in Gallup had sought help from the federal government. "Now that I'm aware of this funding that's available, I would definitely want McKinley County and the surrounding areas to take advantage of it," she said.

But, they haven't, and neither have hundreds of other counties with high fatality rates.

While triumphant press releases herald multimillion-dollar grants scattered across the country, most of them to large cities with their share of dangerous streets, a USA TODAY investigation has found that persistent barriers block the neediest communities from winning grants that could save lives.

The Safe Streets program is just one of at least 20 new competitive grants that will divvy up billions of dollars in infrastructure funding over the next few years. Researchers already have pointed out the same few states routinely win this type of grant, and the Government Accountability Office testified before Congress last summer that rural, tribal and other typically underserved communities often can't compete.

As the third round of applications opens, the U.S. Department of Transportation is expanding its outreach to places that need help, said Christopher Coes, assistant secretary for transportation policy, when presented with USA TODAY's findings.

"We're doing this data-driven and community-based approach where our impact is going really well and where are things that we need to do better."

## Outreach hasn't been there

The Transportation Department is supposed to ensure underserved communities have access to these grants, but the law that created the Safe Streets program never specified how. So the agency has largely relied on outside organizations, newsletters and webinars.

Some places figured it out. The program has delivered funding to every state, with more than 1,100 awards ranging from just a few thousand dollars for a remote Alaskan village to \$51 million for New York City. For hundreds, it's their first federal grant, Coes said.

But no one from the DOT reached out directly to disadvantaged and rural places dealing with high death rates to tell them about the money.

Gallup, for example. Or rural Robeson County, North Carolina, where a mostly Native American and Black population struggles with one of the state's worst fatality rates. Or Clayton County, Georgia, just outside Atlanta, where the state has identified crash hot spots with crosswalks spaced a half-mile apart and hard to find.

The bulk of the funding, about \$1.2 billion, has been concentrated in 85 "implementation grants"—large, highly competitive awards to fix problems communities have already identified. New York City plans to use its grants to add bike lanes, elevate crosswalks and install other pedestrian safety structures along dangerous streets in Manhattan and Queens.

Applying for federal grants is typically more complex and time-consuming than state or local grants. Only about 11



Parents join students walking to school in Las Cruces, N.M., where the city and county have won \$800,000 from the U.S. Department of Transportation in a program to help communities keep pedestrians, cyclists and drivers safe from traffic accidents. NATHAN J FISH/LAS CRUCES SUN-NEWS FILE



Several pedestrians have been killed while dashing across this section of Interstate 40, which separates downtown Gallup, N.M., from stores and restaurants. AUSTIN FAST/USA TODAY

5 places that applied for these grants won, according to USA TODAY's analysis. To be eligible, communities must have a safety plan that meets all DOT standards and write up to 12 pages making a compelling case for how the award would fix their safety problems.

"It took five people of our seven-member team here in this department to complete that grant," said Tomika Monteville, former transportation director for San Antonio, Texas, which won \$4.4 million to build midblock pedestrian crossings along a dangerous, multi-lane street.

"You've got to have a good writer; you've got to have a keen understanding of all the programs that connect to tell the story of your community," Monteville said at a Safe Streets webinar hosted by a tech company last spring.

The rest of the Safe Streets money has been divided into more than 1,000 smaller planning grants, and the department made applying for them "as simple as possible" to attract underserved communities that earned nearly \$300,000 to draft a safety plan for four of South Carolina's southernmost counties, including the vacation destination Hilton Head Island.

South Carolina had the fourth-highest pedestrian fatality rate in the country for 2021, so Rossi was disappointed to see few other places in her state apply in the first round. "Maybe folks didn't realize the application process wasn't really that awful," she said.

"The maximum narrative was 300 words, so it was like a paragraph," said Stephanie Rossi, planning director for the Lowcountry Council of Governments, a partnership that earned nearly \$300,000 to draft a safety plan for four of South Carolina's southernmost counties, including the vacation destination Hilton Head Island.

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Two years into the program, the DOT has at least \$230 million for planning grants sitting unused, simply because too few places applied.

"Every complete, eligible application that came in received an award," Walker said. "We want every entity out there, all the locals, to have these grants and these action plans in place."

**'Target areas' for help**

The Department of Transportation knows where fatal crashes happen frequently. It has compiled dozens of details on each crash for nearly 50 years, and last summer, it mapped out counties with high death rates.

department reached out to places it labeled as "target areas."

Reaching out directly "might be overstepping what the federal government can do," said Maria Zimmerman, who leads technical aid efforts within the department. "If I called your mayor, and I didn't call another mayor, is that being unfair in calling one versus another?"

But after USA TODAY began asking last fall how the department has directly reached out to needy places with high death rates, they started to do just that.

Safe Streets program manager Paul Teicher said his team has communicated with leaders of two cities "in the past few weeks" and provided a list of 16 other places that have had recent contact with his team. Teicher named Mobile, Alabama, as one city the team has encouraged to apply, along with Hartsville, South Carolina.

A separate team traveled to almost two dozen communities in the past year to encourage applications, including the Navajo Nation, Las Vegas and Arlington, Virginia, according to DOT spokesperson Sean Manning.

It's a start, but USA TODAY found more than 1,000 counties with above-average fatality rates that haven't won any money.

Coes, the assistant secretary for transportation policy, pointed out that the Safe Streets program is not the only money available for traffic safety projects, listing hundreds of billions of dollars in other grants. But Safe Streets was specifically simplified and set up so even the smallest of towns could apply directly for federal money.

Patty Holland, Gallup's chief financial officer, said her city has several projects that would likely be eligible for Safe Streets funding, but the grant just wasn't on their radar. Without a dedicated grant writer who can sift through thousands of options, they miss a lot of opportunities.

"It's very, very overwhelming," Holland said. "We spend so much of our time pursuing all of those new (federal) requirements that change every year, we just don't have the time to reach out and look for these."

**Where is the money going?**

When communities apply for Safe Streets funding, the Transportation Department asks for three data points: total roadway deaths, average fatality rate over the past five years, and percentage of the population considered "underserved."

Ideally, grants should end up in counties that score highly in all three. But USA TODAY's analysis found little correlation between a county's total funding and those statistics. What most recipients of Safe Streets money do share is a larger population and a strong

capacity to apply for grants.

They often have experienced government employees, colleges or universities, and an engaged community with high voter turnout, stable incomes and health insurance, said Kristin Smith of Headwaters Economics, a Montana-based nonprofit. Her research team developed a tool it calls a "capacity index" to help understand why some communities struggle to access federal funding.

The DOT has announced about \$1.7 billion overall in Safe Streets grants as of December, and 82% of that has gone to counties the index defines as "high capacity," according to USA TODAY's analysis. Meanwhile, low-capacity counties have received less than 2% of the money.

"When it comes to funding that is meant to save people's lives, that's designed to meet people's basic needs, a competitive grant, in my opinion, isn't the right tool," Smith said.

"For the rural communities where I work (in Montana), they can barely keep up with day-to-day operations," she added, describing a county without a single engineer, planner or grant writer on staff. "If you add in a federal grant with just one more task, it's actually a big ask."

Many of the places least able to compete for grants are those most in need of this funding. The rural fatality rate is about two times higher than the urban rate, according to the 2022 National Roadway Safety Strategy, disproportionately impacting people who are Black and Native American.

DOT officials point to data showing they've sent about half the grants to rural areas, which the agency defines as any urban area with fewer than 200,000 residents. That means even mid-sized cities like Amarillo, Texas, and Gainesville, Florida, would be lumped in with the tiny Montana county Smith described.

That same data shows just 1 in 5 dollars have gone to rural places.

Many of these rural grants have gone to affluent small towns, including dozens that reported few or no traffic deaths. They include places that serve as vacation gateways, such as Boulder, Colorado (which won \$23 million); Missoula, Montana (\$9.3 million); Burlington, Vermont (\$1.2 million); Nantucket, Massachusetts (\$460,000); and Key West, Florida (\$400,000).

Just one low-capacity rural county has managed to win an implementation grant: Modoc County in far northeast California. The Transportation Department awarded nearly \$13 million there to add bicycle lanes, crosswalks and speed controls around tribal areas.

That leaves hundreds of low- and medium-capacity counties without a cent of Safe Streets funding—even places whose data would put them at the top of DOT's scorecard. Places like Gallup.

## It takes resources

Competing for grants takes resources small towns often just don't have, said Evan Williams. He leads the six-member staff of the Northwest New Mexico Council of Governments, which helps McKinley County and two neighboring counties coordinate on transportation, economic development and environmental issues.

Williams' staff points out grant opportunities to the tiny tribal communities around Gallup and helps review applications, but most of these places can't keep grant writers on staff. It's often the village clerk or manager who might squeeze in a grant application between typing up local meeting notices or driving the school bus, Williams said, leaving them little time to decipher complex federal guidelines.

And then there's all the accounting paperwork to be done after winning a grant. That's why Williams said they gravitate toward state dollars, which often require a smaller local investment and less-stringent reporting requirements.

"If you barely have time to write the grant, you're never going to have time to manage the grant," Williams said. "They could use all the grants in the world, but they don't really have the capacity to manage them."

Over the next three years, the transportation department will award the remaining \$3.3 billion in Safe Streets funding. That means more opportunities for hard-hit communities to turn their plans into action.

Smith said she's encouraged that more federal grants have been setting aside money for rural and tribal communities. Safe Streets, though, has no such quotas—putting the have-nots at risk of falling further behind.

"Not only are those places missing out on really critical funding to improve the safety of their residents, but they're also missing out on economic development," Smith said.

"If we keep this cycle going and keep repeating these patterns, we just polarize the country even more."