

# Scandals Mount for New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham

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Searchlight New Mexico, an independent investigative non-profit organization, broke the [news](#) last week that Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham's office supported using the encrypted messaging app Signal to conceal communications among staff.

The potential violation of the New Mexico Public Records Act came to light after the New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department, which is overseen by the governor, fired two senior employees who raised concerns over the app's use.

“Department leadership then set many of those communications to automatically delete, rendering them forever inaccessible to attorneys, members of the public and journalists,” the non-profit outlet reported. “Searchlight also found that the Office of the Governor and the state's Department of Information Technology supported the systemic deletion of messages, according to emails and policy guidance obtained through an Inspection of Public Records (IPRA) request.”

The governor's office itself, Searchlight wrote, instructed staff to regularly delete their messages to circumvent oversight.

“Every single text message that you send or receive likely qualifies as a ‘transitory record,’” reads the [official guidance](#). “We recommend that you delete all text messages which are ‘transitory records’ every ten days. You may delete them more often if you wish.”

Considering the plague of scandals to swarm the governor, many likely have.

State Republicans demanded answers on just the latest controversy to rock the governor's office in late April when Searchlight [first reported](#) the encrypted messaging app was used in the Children, Youth and Families Department.

## **House Republicans call for investigation into data dumping and IPRA violations by CYFD and Lujan Grisham administration**

Santa Fe, NM- Today, House Republicans responded to an investigative report published by Searchlight New Mexico that reveals state employees in the Children Youth and Families Department (CYFD) have been using an encrypted mobile app, in violation of public transparency laws. [Searchlight New Mexico highlighted ongoing issues with the Children Youth and Families Department \(CYFD\) and Inspection of Public Records Act \(IPRA\) requests made by the publication.](#)

*"Hearing that CYFD is using an encrypted app to conveniently hide conversations and actions by government employees is the tip of the iceberg," said House Republican Caucus Chair Rebecca Dow (TorC). "For an agency that is charged with protecting our most vulnerable populations to delete the very communications that could help aide in the reformation of that troubled department is unconscionable. This activity must cease immediately."*

The CYFD Secretary openly admits to using the encrypted communications, and regularly deleting the data, in violation of IPRA laws designed to foster transparency and trust in government.

*"What we have seen over the past year is a government that has hidden itself away in a maze of virtual walls. For the leadership in any state agency to think that they can circumvent transparency by deleting public documents is a slap in the face to New Mexicans who have placed their trust in public service," said House Republican Leader Jim Townsend (Artesia).*

House Republicans today requested the Attorney General and State Auditor to immediately address the potential violations of New Mexico's IPRA statute, and investigate how widespread use of encrypted communications and subsequent data dumping is within New Mexico's government agencies. House Republicans also call on Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham to provide a report detailing whether her office staff and or cabinet level staff have been using data encryption and data dumping.

*"These actions are shredding the trust we have built over the last several years when it comes to public transparency," said House Republican Whip Rod Montoya (Farmington).*

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"For the leadership in any state agency to think they can circumvent transparency by deleting public documents is a slap in the face to New Mexicans who have placed their trust in public service," House Republican Minority Leader Jim Townsend wrote in a statement.

"The governor's staff talks transparency and ethics, yet allows her departments to destroy critical information," Townsend told The Federalist in a follow-up.

The revelation, however, is just the tip of the iceberg threatening to tank the leftist governor's relatively favorable approval numbers. The latest data compiled by the [Morning Consult](#) shows Grisham with a net 5 percent positive rating, although 18 percent of registered voters reported no opinion.

## **Lockdown Hypocrisy**

Grisham's handling of the COVID crisis itself is a scandal, dismissing personal liberties with the embrace of stringent lockdowns in line with her Democrat peers in New York and California. Despite implementing some of the harshest and

most prolonged restrictions, New Mexico [ranks](#) 15th in deaths per million, eight places above neighboring Texas, and 12 above Florida, the two freest states in the nation, much to the envy of New Mexico Republicans opposed to the lockdowns.

“Our neighboring states have learned to adopt and flourish all while coping with the dwindling COVID issues, but not New Mexico,” Townsend told The Federalist. “Our governor has passionately invoked one administrative fiat after another, imposing these haphazard rules on everyone except herself.”

Townsend pointed to Grisham as an emblem of the public health emergency representing an [elite-driven](#) crisis when she appeared to violate her own edicts to purchase jewelry. In May last year, a local outlet in Albuquerque [reported](#) Grisham opened a jewelry store to purchase expensive jewels while “non-essential” businesses were shut down.

“We are in really tough financial times as a state. It mirrors the incredible, personal sacrifices that happen every single day because people have limited ability to work, telecommuting and many people, in fact, have lost their jobs,” Grisham said on April 3, lecturing New Mexicans to stay home.

Jewelry stores for the governor, however, counted as essential. Days later, KRQE News 13 reported, Grisham ordered jewels over the phone from the shut-down shop.

## **Taxpayer-Funded Groceries**

In February, the investigative team of another Albuquerque news station [reported](#) their findings from a review of six months’ worth of invoices, receipts, and expense reports that revealed thousands of dollars in groceries purchased from the governor’s contingency fund.

While New Mexicans [waited in line](#) at grocery stores operating under Grisham’s ordered limited capacity last year, Grisham ordered more than \$6,500 in groceries to the governor’s residence, according to the Albuquerque-based KOB 4 Investigates Team.

“According to receipts made public through an Inspection of Public Records Act request, the items include anything from laundry detergent to Wagyu beef, tuna steaks, top sirloin and hundreds of dollars in alcohol purchases,” the outlet reported.

The governor’s office told KOB 4 the gourmet food was primarily for staff engaged in meetings.

“They are sporadic, but they last a long time and so there’s food at those meetings often prepared,” Grisham Communications Director Tripp Stelnicki told the outlet. “There are people at the residency who are all masked.”

How many were welcome in the home remains unclear, however, the station reported. At the same time she was holding staff meetings in her home, the governor urged state subjects to telework and refrain from welcoming others in theirs.

## **Hush Money Payments**

In April, Grisham fell into the spotlight as a female target of allegations charging sexual misconduct when the Albuquerque Journal [revealed](#) the governor’s campaign made heavy payments to a former staffer who accused her of harassment at a staff meeting.

Grisham’s campaign, the journal reported, has paid “at least \$62,500” from a settlement negotiated with a law firm that represents James Hallinan, who served as a spokesman for Grisham during her 2018 campaign.

In late 2019, Hallinan said the governor poured water on his crotch and grabbed it through his pants while she laughed in front of other staff. Grisham has denied the incident ever took place, although her campaign has made payments of \$12,500 in legal expenses as reported by the Albuquerque Journal.

How many payments remain to be processed from the settlement is unclear. Campaign spokesman Jared Leopold told the paper the payments resolve “numerous dubious and disputed potential claims made by Mr. Hallinan arising from his employment in 2018 with the campaign organization and his subsequent search for employment” and were made to quiet a distraction.