

Three years ago, Jeremay Martinez – now a 30-year-old single parent in her native Espanola, New Mexico – underwent the training required to someday become a foster mom. At the time, she didn't know if she could handle the hard work of an additional child, or the emotions of someday handing that kid back to a birth parent.

Then in the summer of 2018, she learned through a connection with her dad about a 25-year-old local woman dealing with an addiction to opioids who desperately needed foster care for her fourth child. Martinez didn't hesitate to say 'yes' but quickly learned that no class could prepare her for the ups and downs of raising a boy with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS).

"The first two and a half months are really hard," Martinez recalled of taking the boy home after two stressful weeks in the hospital's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, or NICU. "Most people would have freaked out, because he shook, he cried a lot, and he needed comforting...It took a lot of comfort and love but now he's doing OK."

But "doing OK" for a baby born with an opioid dependency still means some difficulty with motor skills and other deficiencies. Martinez says the child still receives a form of occupational therapy twice a week and may continue doing so for some time.

In hindsight, Martinez realized she had a lot to learn about raising an NAS baby, even in a county with a serious opioid problem. She realized her initial dream of bringing the boy's mom home to live with her and helping her get off opioids to be able to raise her own son was overly optimistic and perhaps naïve. Within two weeks, the birth mother – who'd been legally prescribed Purdue Pharma's OxyContin as a teen but then suffered through eight years of addiction – was gone. Martinez, now legal guardian of the 15-month-old boy, hopes to permanently adopt him.

Meanwhile, she discovered the Espanola community lacked resources for an ever-rising number of kids born with NAS or other problems that resulted from opioid exposure in the womb. Instead, Martinez has improvised – finding an expert in baby massage whose work helped the boy cope with early stomach problems and other issues.

"He had light sensitivity and sound sensitivity but has overcome that," Martinez said. The child was also helped with physical therapy as well as the ongoing occupational therapy. Now, Martinez and a friend who is also a doula – a non-medical companion for major events such as birthing – are looking to see if they can establish a safe haven under New Mexico law where addicted mothers can safely drop off babies they cannot care for.

But now that Martinez knows that babies born with an opioid dependency require so many resources, she hopes that legal action against Big Pharma can help families meet those needs. "We need to work together to come up with things to help these kids," she said. "It's better that we address their problems than just hide."