

# District Courts Tackling Mental Health Issues

A person experiencing a mental health crisis is more likely to be arrested than referred to treatment, and time in jail often worsens the mental health condition, according to research by the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

New Mexico Courts are taking concrete steps to address their communities' mental health needs. The Third Judicial District Court launched an Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT) Program in partnership with Doña Ana County, with federal funding from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration.

Under the program, started in July 2017, a district court judge can order individuals involved in civil proceedings to participate in a structured treatment program developed by a local behavioral health provider. Court and county officials expect the program to reduce the number of people hospitalized or incarcerated due to mental health issues.

The Second Judicial District Court is teaming with the City of Albuquerque and UNM's Health Psychiatric Center to pilot an AOT court.

In anticipation of a fall launch, a delegation from the District Court and the city recently traveled to Ohio to observe two established court-ordered outpatient treatment programs. "With New Mexico's recent enactment of assisted outpatient treatment legislation, it is important that we have this opportunity to observe how other state courts have implemented court-ordered treatment programs," said Second Judicial District Judge Beatrice Brickhouse.

"It was extremely helpful to observe both the court's role in this process and the actual interactions between the judge and the participant," said Ellen Braden, who manages the City of Albuquerque's behavioral health and wellness division. "In Ohio, the judge's engagement with the participants clearly supports the individual's recovery."

## Hospital-Based Hearing Room

The Twelfth Judicial District Court is taking an innovative approach to serving individuals with mental-health related issues.

In April of this year, judges in the Twelfth Judicial District began hearing cases in a hearing room housed inside the behavioral health wing of the Gerald Champion Regional Medical Center in Alamogordo.

The judges participate in an alternating monthly schedule that has a judge conducting hearings at the hospital each week. The district's four judges share in the rotation to help ensure the success of this model.

The Gerald Chapman Regional Medical Center opened the behavioral health unit in Alamogordo in 2016. It provides in-patient services to individuals from around the state. Community, justice partner stakeholders and advocacy groups have joined forces to share ideas and find solutions for people with mental health-related issues.

The hospital-based hearing room is the latest of these ideas.



New Mexico Supreme Court Chief Justice Judith K. Nakamura, fourth from left, recently toured the hearing room inside the Gerald Champion Regional Medical Center in Alamogordo. Also pictured are District Court judges and staff, hospital officials and the director of the Administrative Office of the Courts.

“The outcome has meant more efficient and timelier case resolution practices, as well as a more constructive and less disruptive judicial process for individuals who may be in need of a treatment guardian, involuntary commitment or a guardian/conservator appointment,” said Court Executive Officer Katina Watson.