

Second Judicial District Launches Specialty Court for Individuals with Serious Mental Illness

The Second Judicial District Court collaborated with the City of Albuquerque to secure funding for a specialty court in which the University of New Mexico's Psychiatric Center ("UPC") can request court-appointed outpatient treatment and support for individuals with a serious mental illness.

The funding for this new Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT) court is a federal grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

A 2016 state law allows municipalities and counties to use the civil court system to supervise care for people with a serious mental illness who meet specific legal criteria, which include a history of hospitalization, incarceration or violence, and difficulty maintaining their treatment. The goal of AOT is to ensure participants maintain treatment, thereby reducing the incidence and duration of psychiatric hospitalization, homelessness, incarcerations, and interactions with law enforcement and the criminal justice system.

The specialty court embraces the principles of therapeutic jurisprudence as a means of best ensuring the dignity of the participants. "For now, the program will focus on patients who are leaving the hospital after an involuntary commitment," said District Judge Beatrice Brickhouse, who is the primary SJDC judge involved in AOT. "In addition to UPC, we plan to expand to other inpatient facilities, such as Lovelace and Kaseman Presbyterian hospitals, as well as community referrals, such as family members."

"The Second Judicial District Court and its partners will continue to work closely with providers, disability rights advocates, family members, and consumers to ensure AOT is effective, fair, and respectful to all involved," said Chief Judge Stan Whitaker.

Program participants will collaborate with service providers to develop individualized treatment plans and receive 24-hour access to services and support. Specialized assertive community treatment teams or intensive case management would then follow up to check on participants, link them with services, and monitor the court-ordered treatment. "We are going to add a level of intensity to try to reduce mental illness crises and repeated hospitalizations," said Denise Lin, M.D., Medical Director of Inpatient



Judge Beatrice Brickhouse will be the primary judge presiding over AOT Court. Also pictured are AOT Court Program Manager Lisa Schatz-Vance (second from left) and Court Advisory Board members Ellen Braden from the City of Albuquerque and John Schoeppner, a Hearing Officer in the Second Judicial District Court.

Services at UPC. Services may include mental health treatment, medication, substance abuse counseling, benefits assistance and other resources such as supportive housing, vocational rehabilitation, and family member support.

“The Court’s AOT program will implement evidence-based practices that will focus on early intervention to improve outcomes for individuals with critical mental health issues,” said Chief Judge Whitaker. “This specialty court is a resource to the community and is recognized as an evidence-based practice by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs; the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration; and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Its use is also endorsed by the American Psychiatric Association, American College of Emergency Physicians, International Association of Chiefs of Police, National Sheriffs’ Association and National Alliance on Mental Illness.”