

Court's Family Advocacy Program Earns State Bar Award, New Federal Grant

It started as a pilot program in Sandoval County District Court with one paid staff member assisted by a group of interns. Five years later, the Family Advocacy Program is a joint initiative of the Second and Thirteenth Judicial Districts and the Administrative Office of the Courts. It also has full paid staff in Sandoval, Valencia and Bernalillo Counties.

Along with this growth, the program is garnering recognition for outstanding work. This past August, the State Bar of New Mexico named it Outstanding Program for 2018. A month later, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services awarded the program a \$7.7 million grant that will enable its expansion into San Juan and McKinley counties.

The Family Advocacy Program uses a multi-disciplinary team approach to representing parents in juvenile abuse/neglect proceedings.

The team—consisting of an attorney, social worker and peer mentor—works to help the parents make the necessary changes to reunite with their children and maintain a stable, healthy lifestyle going forward.

Since its July 2013 inception, the program has supported 101 cases, involving 47 parents and 205 children. So far, 82 of those cases have been closed, with only four resulting in new cases being opened against the same parents.

Program director Dominica Sisneros-Montano, a licensed master social worker, said the program works because “we take the time to engage with clients as humans and do in-depth case management.”



Dominica Sisneros-Montano, Caitlin DiFiore and Christi Fields are members of the Family Advocacy Program team.

That engagement includes social workers accompanying clients to court hearings and visits with their children. Program social workers also help clients fill out paperwork to get counseling or other services needed to make the lifestyle changes judges want to see before reuniting parents with their children.

“The quality of our work is intense,” Sisneros-Montano said. “We are helping people navigate the legal system and mentoring them so they can become better parents. The result is happier, more stable families, which is good for the entire state.”

The State Bar of New Mexico and the Department of Health and Human Services are not alone recognizing the program's positive impact. The American Bar Association asked the program to develop a training model that courts in other jurisdictions can use to establish similar programs. In addition, the program's social workers were invited to serve on the Steering Committee of the ABA's National Alliance for Parent Representation, the only national legal organization dedicated to improving legal representation for parents in child welfare cases.

“All of this recognition is a result of our evidence-based practices and performance data,” Sisneros-Montano said. “We are showing fast time to family recovery, lower rates of termination of parental rights, and higher rates of guardianship.”

Court officials are excited about the program's potential, especially in light of the federal grant. “In awarding this grant,

the federal Department of Health and Human Services is recognizing the program's success and expressing confidence that we can do even more to improve the health and well-being of more New Mexico families," said Marie Ward, presiding judge of the Second Judicial District's Children's Court Division.

"AOC hopes to take the program statewide if it continues to show success," said AOC Director Artie Pepin. "The grant funding will permit courts to hire additional social workers and parent mentors to serve more clients, provide training and develop a database to help in evaluating how well the program is working."