Administrative Office of the Courts

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Contact: Barry Massey, public information officer
bmassey@nmcourts.gov
505-470-3436

National pretrial group honors Supreme Court Justice and NM courts administrator

SANTA FE – Two New Mexico courts officials have been recognized by a national organization for their work to improve the state's pretrial justice system.

Supreme Court Justice Michael E. Vigil received the Charles W. Daniels Judicial Leadership Award from the National Association of Pretrial Services Agencies (NAPSA), and Administrative Office of the Courts Director Arthur Pepin received the organization's John C. Hendricks Pioneer Award.

"The awards recognize the commitment, vision and leadership of Justice Vigil and Artie Pepin in promoting a fair and effective justice system in New Mexico through legal and evidence-based pretrial practices and policies," said NAPSA President Spurgeon Kennedy.

The awards were presented at NAPSA's annual conference and training institute in Atlanta, Ga.

"Justice Vigil and Artie are truly deserving of national recognition for advancing pretrial justice in New Mexico. Their efforts benefit all New Mexicans by helping courts fulfill the promise of equal justice under law," said Chief Justice C. Shannon Bacon, who accepted the leadership award Tuesday on behalf of Justice Vigil. He was unable to attend the conference.

The leadership award is named in honor of former state Supreme Court Justice Charles W. Daniels, who championed pretrial justice reform.

The pretrial process begins when a person is accused – but not convicted – of a crime and it continues until charges are resolved, such as when they are dismissed, a jury reaches a verdict at a trial or the individual enters a plea. A person is presumed innocent throughout the pretrial stage of the justice system. The law balances the need to safeguard the community while protecting an accused person's rights and liberty interest.

Justice Vigil has served on the state's highest court since 2018, and was Chief Justice from 2020 to 2021. He previously was a judge on the state Court of Appeals for 15 years.

Pepin received his award on Monday. He has worked as director of the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) since 2006. The AOC provides support for courts across New Mexico, including technology, budgeting and human resources management. The AOC also serves as a liaison with the legislative and executive branches of government.

Justice Vigil helped secure funding from the Legislature for the expansion of robust pretrial services in courts across the state. As Chief Justice, he spearheaded the development of around-the-clock electronic monitoring of defendants ordered to wear GPS location tracking devices while awaiting trial. A program in AOC now provides monitoring after the business hours of courts — nights, weekends and holidays.

Pepin has advocated for pretrial reform for a decade. He wrote a 2012-2013 policy paper for the Conference of State Court Administrators about evidence-based pretrial decision-making in which the supervision and release of arrested individuals is guided by validated research and information on the likelihood that a released person will return to court for future hearings and remain arrest free while awaiting trial.

In 2016, New Mexico voters approved a constitutional amendment to move the state away from a money-based pretrial system in which defendants – regardless of the danger they posed to the public – could secure their release before trial if they could afford a money bail bond.

Since the change in law, the Judiciary has been building a network of pretrial services programs to help people comply with their release conditions and return for future court appearances.

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Chief Justice C. Shannon Bacon accepts an award from the National Association of Pretrial Services Agencies (NAPSA) on behalf of Justice Michael Vigil. Photo courtesy of the Administrative Office of the Courts.

AOC Director Artie Pepin received an award Monday from the National Association of Pretrial Services Agencies (NAPSA). Photo courtesy of the Administrative Office of the Courts.

Justice Michael E. Vigil.
Photo courtesy of NM Supreme Court