Administrative Office of the Courts

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Contact: Barry Massey, public information officer
bmassey@nmcourts.gov
505-827-4805
505-470-3436

New Mexico Judiciary streamlines operations with administrative consolidation of magistrate and district courts

SANTA FE – To improve court efficiencies across New Mexico, the Judiciary has combined the administration of magistrate and district courts within the state's judicial districts.

"Streamlining our court system advances judicial excellence in New Mexico," Supreme Court Chief Justice Judith K. Nakamura said. "An administrative consolidation allows our magistrate and district courts to share resources such as jury pools. We can more quickly and better respond to needs for court services in our communities by managing magistrate courts locally rather than from a central office in Santa Fe."

The Administrative Office of the Courts had managed the state's 46 magistrate court locations, providing support on budget, policy and human resource issues for the 67 judges and 222 employees in those courts. Magistrate court operations have been funded through the annual budget of the AOC — about $28.7 million in the just completed 2019 fiscal year.

With the start of the new fiscal year on July 1, the transition to local administration of magistrate courts has been completed. Funding for magistrate courts is included in the budgets for district court operations. Decisions on magistrate court hiring and staffing will be made locally within a judicial district rather than through a centralized process overseen by the AOC. Chief district court judges serve as the top administrative authority for magistrate court operations within a judicial district.

District and magistrate court clerks will be cross-trained and comparably paid, which more easily permits staffing adjustments when needed and helps ensure that courts can fully operate when there are vacancies.

The consolidation does not apply in the Second Judicial District of Bernalillo County, which has a Metropolitan Court rather than a magistrate court. The Metropolitan and the Second Judicial District Courts separately administer their operations in the state's largest county.

"With this change, the Administrative Office of the Courts can focus on the operation of statewide programs such as technology and access to justice, ensuring that New Mexico courts adhere to the best practices followed by other courts across the country," said AOC Director Artie Pepin. "The AOC has been the only state court administrative office in the country with the responsibility to manage the day-to-day operations of courts."

The AOC will continue to conduct audits of magistrate court operations, handle leasing of magistrate court buildings, provide legal guidance for magistrate court judges and process end-of-month financial reports from the magistrate courts.

Magistrate court have limited jurisdiction and handle DWI cases, misdemeanors, traffic violations, civil actions up to $10,000 and hold preliminary hearings to determine probable cause on felony charges. Magistrate judges are not required to be lawyers except in Doña Ana County.

District courts are general jurisdiction trial courts that decide adult and juvenile criminal cases as well as civil matters, including domestic relations, contract disputes and personal injury litigation. District courts also hear appeals from administrative agencies and lower courts. There are 94 district court judges in 34 court locations in 13 districts statewide.

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