Supreme Court of New Mexico

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Aug. 14, 2024

Court pilot project in San Miguel County to help people with mental illness

LAS VEGAS, NM – The New Mexico court system is launching a program on Friday to assist people with a history of mental illness who are arrested for misdemeanors in San Miguel County.

The competency diversion pilot project in the magistrate court in Las Vegas will steer people with severe mental illness away from the justice system and help connect them to community-based treatment and support services to potentially meet their needs for housing, food, medication and employment.

"The goal is to create a pathway to treatment to stabilize the lives of people with severe mental illness and promote public safety by reducing re-arrests," said Justice Briana H. Zamora, the Supreme Court's liaison to the Commission on Mental Health and Competency, which was formed to improve how the justice system deals with people with behavioral health issues.

Currently, misdemeanor charges are dismissed when a person is found incompetent to stand trial. As a result, people struggling with mental illness may repeatedly face arrest without addressing their underlying behavioral health issues. That places a strain on law enforcement, hospital emergency rooms and courts that frequently interact with the same individuals.

The pilot project will provide early diversion to treatment and a collaborative community-based approach to care to meet the individual needs of eligible people who agree to participate.

- **Diversion Pathway**: When booked into a jail on misdemeanor charges, a person will be screened to determine eligibility. Individuals will be referred to the voluntary program for three to six months if approved by their defense attorney, prosecutors and the court. Anyone charged with misdemeanor DWI is ineligible.

- **Collaborative Care:** "Forensic navigators" will help participants find treatment and other community services. Participants voluntarily consent to any treatment. It is not court ordered. Criminal charges are dismissed for individuals who successfully complete a navigation plan developed in collaboration with them. Cases proceed as normal for participants who fail to remain engaged with available services.

"We are extremely honored to be selected as one of the sites for the pilot project. Because Las Vegas is home to the New Mexico Behavioral Health Institute, our community understands the

importance of providing mental health services to those who most need it," said Fourth Judicial District Court Judge Michael Aragon. "The pilot project also will help participants connect to necessary support services. The goal is to chart a course for recovery for individuals that allows them to re-enter the community and avoid future arrests."

The Judiciary is implementing similar initiatives across the state. A misdemeanor competency diversion pilot project was launched in June in Doña Ana County in the Third Judicial District and one is planned later this year in the Twelfth Judicial District of Lincoln and Otero counties. Funding comes from money the Legislature allocated to the Administrative Office of the Courts for pilot programs, including those related to behavioral health services. Future expansion to more locations is possible based on the experiences of the pilot sites.

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Editor's Note: A public event to launch the misdemeanor competency diversion pilot project will be held on Friday, Aug. 16, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the historic Plaza Hotel in Las Vegas.

Justice Briana H. Zamora

District Judge Michael Aragon