



## Administrative Office of the Courts

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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New court program offers help to people struggling with mental illness

SANTA FE – The First Judicial District Court announced a program today to help newly arrested people with severe mental illness obtain treatment and other community services. Individuals charged with misdemeanors, except DWI, and nonviolent felony offenses are eligible for the program.

The initiative is the fourth competency diversion pilot program established by New Mexico courts since last year.

“The program diverts qualifying people away from the justice system and connects them to treatment and support services needed for possible recovery,” said Justice Briana H. Zamora, the Supreme Court’s liaison to the Commission on Mental Health and Competency.

First Judicial District Court Chief Judge Bryan Biedscheid said, “We can make our communities safer by addressing the behavioral health issues of people who otherwise may repeatedly cycle in and out of the justice system.”

[A community event about the competency diversion program](#) is scheduled for Friday, Sept. 12, at the Santa Fe County Magistrate Court in Santa Fe.

### How the program works

- **Diversion:** Newly arrested people are screened to determine their eligibility for the program when booked into a jail on a qualifying misdemeanor or nonviolent felony charges. Individuals who agree to participate – if approved by their defense attorney, prosecutors and the court – will be referred to the program for three to six months if it involves a misdemeanor case or six months to one year on a felony case.
- **Collaborative Care:** Trained staff, called navigators, help link program participants to treatment and other community services to meet each person’s needs, including assistance with housing, food and employment. Participants voluntarily consent to any behavioral health treatment. It is not court ordered treatment. Courts dismiss charges when individuals successfully complete a navigation plan developed in collaboration with them. Criminal cases proceed for participants who fail to remain engaged with available services.

## **Improving outcomes**

The pilot program can help reduce the likelihood of rearrests for people with a history of mental illness. Currently, people with untreated mental illness may frequently cycle through the justice system if they are found incompetent to stand trial because their mental illness prevents them from understanding and participating in their legal proceedings.

## **Community problem solving**

“Our courts serve as community problem solvers by operating competency diversion programs,” said Chief Justice David K. Thomson. “These programs demonstrate the Judiciary’s commitment to advancing efforts by the Legislature and governor to improve how New Mexico responds to people struggling with mental illness who come into contact with the criminal justice system.”

With funding provided during a special legislative session last year, the Judiciary implemented competency diversion pilot programs in 2024 in Doña Ana County in the Third Judicial District, in San Miguel, Guadalupe and Mora counties in the Fourth Judicial District, and in Lincoln and Otero counties in the Twelfth Judicial District. The First Judicial District Court launched an assisted outpatient treatment program (AOT) earlier this year. Planning is underway for an AOT program in an additional judicial district and a competency diversion program in another court.

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Supreme Court  
Justice  
Briana H. Zamora



Supreme Court  
Chief Justice  
David K. Thomson



First Judicial District  
Chief Judge  
Brian Biedscheid