

# U.S. JUDGES HELP SET UP MEXICO'S FIRST DRUG COURT

by Mikel Chavers



**“You’ve got cartels in Mexico who have all this product and they can’t get it into the United States, they’re going to start selling it down there to their young people ... and (Mexico) did not have the type of expertise that we had developed in the past 20 years of working with drug courts and dealing with this population.”**

—Santa Barbara County, Calif., Judge Rogelio Flores

Five American drug court judges were on a mission to Mexico.

When the judges traveled 250 miles south of the Texas border to Monterrey to help set up Mexico’s first drug court, they wanted to do more than just the standard training for a week. They wanted to share the amazing things they’d seen serving on a drug court. They wanted to impart their wisdom gleaned from years of experience of handling a completely different client—the drug addict who can often benefit from a different approach.

“Literally there are those moments that occur in court where I almost see the transformation occurring right on the spot where people finally get it,” said one of the team members, retired New Mexico Judge Michael Kavanaugh, who served on a drug court in Bernalillo County. “When you as a drug court judge first start to take cases, it is amazing to see just after the first few months what occurs in the clients themselves.”

When drug court judges see defendants the day after arrest, some are in pretty bad condition—looking and smelling bad and physically deteriorated, Kavanaugh said. But many clean up and sober up in drug court, which connects them to long-term treatment and heavy monitoring, including periodically standing before the judge.

“You’re the person who’s asking them about their family, their children, their work and giving them positive re-enforcement. These people are responding to you and communicating to you (in a way) that shows that they are getting it—they are getting how they’ve been making these mistakes.”

Santa Barbara County, Calif., Judge Rogelio Flores, a drug court judge for 15 years, was also part of that team. He said part of the magic of drug courts is maintaining a personal relationship with each offender.

“You see people getting better,” Flores said. The courts save money and lives by divert-

ing people out of jail and helping them kick addictions. His drug court saved \$11 million in the 2007–08 tax year. Because of the drug court, 100 women delivered babies that are not addicted to drugs, Flores said.

“There’s really a hunger for this in Mexico,” Flores said.

Drug courts in the U.S. have been around for 20 years and they now exist in every state and Washington, D.C., according to the National Association of Drug Court Professionals. The association coordinated the trip to Mexico.

While the U.S. has lots of experience with drug addiction and treatment, Mexico historically hasn’t struggled with the heavy social price tag of drug addiction, according to Kavanaugh.

He said the rising drug problem in Mexico is an issue of supply and demand. As the U.S. made it harder for the drug cartels of Mexico to get their illicit drugs across the border, the cartels are searching for a new market in their home country.

“The issues of addiction are beginning to really compound the problem of drugs and violence,” said New Mexico Judge Marie Baca, another member of the team. “People get trapped into that cycle.”

She and the other teammates hope the drug court prospers and the idea spreads throughout Mexico.

“Lots of times we talk about the problems with illegal immigration and drug cartels; we also need to recognize these are real people with real issues. We are the courts and can help people turn things around,” Baca said.

The federal government shares that hope.

“The U.S. is committed to helping Mexico continue to expand the program in Nuevo Leon and initiate drug courts in other states throughout Mexico,” said Gil Kerlikowske, policy director at the White House Office of National Drug Control. 