



Bexar County Commissioners Court

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Conference presents national experts on therapeutic justice

More than 200 judges, attorneys, law enforcement personnel, treatment providers and probation officers attended the first Specialty Court Training Conference in Bexar County on Friday. The conference was presented by the nonprofit Therapeutic Justice Foundation in partnership with Bexar County Judicial Services and the University of Texas at San Antonio College of Public Policy.

Specialty courts provide intensive treatment services and one-on-one intervention by a team that includes a judge, case managers, probation officers and treatment providers. The courts address the root cause of a person's criminal behavior through counseling, substance abuse treatment, education, housing and employment assistance.

Bexar County operates 8 criminal and civil specialty treatment courts. The first Drug Court was established by then-Judge Al Alonso in 2001. The body of specialty courts now includes programs for drug offenders who have co-occurring mental illness, juvenile drug offenders, military veterans, DWI offenders with severe alcohol problems, and individuals convicted of felony prostitution.

"Years ago Commissioners Court was faced with building a new expensive jail to house a growing number of inmates, or find a way to prevent the cycle of recidivism in our community without compromising safety," County Judge Nelson Wolff said. "Specialty courts have made a significant impact on lowering the jail population and in return we are helping individuals build healthy and stable lives."

The single largest cost in county government is the operation of the Adult Detention Center. A study conducted in 2001, when the average daily jail population was at more than 3,400, concluded that by 2009 the jail population would increase to 4,600. The study was close — by 2009 the County's average daily jail population hit 4,400 with 40 percent of arrests being drug and/or alcohol related. With the implementation of jail diversion programs and the specialty courts, among other efforts, the average daily population is now 3,340. The County's specialty courts have graduated more than 1,000 individuals with 87 percent remaining arrest-free.

Friday's conference featured Dr. Doug Marlowe, chief of science, law and policy for the National Association of Drug Court Professionals. The Association provides guidance, training and standards for specialty courts. Dr. Marlowe said in the past the criminal justice system has not been judged on how it reduces crime, rehabilitates people or increases public safety. His research over the past decade has developed standards for effective drug court programs and holding the justice system accountable.

"Here in Bexar County the thirst and hunger for information on best practices is incredible and very encouraging," Dr. Marlowe said.

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