

As the Court Executive serving the 6th and 22nd Judicial Districts for the past 20 years, I would like to offer some factual corrections to the recent article regarding former 6th Judicial District Court Judge, Nathaniel Baca (hereinafter, Mr. Baca).

Judicial Training for Trauma-Informed Practice

Each judge in the 6th Judicial District is assigned a diverse caseload, and within those caseloads, individual judges are also assigned specialized case types. In this instance, Mr. Baca was assigned the District's Competency Diversion Program and mental health cases. The professional development training he attended was specifically tailored to the unique nature and particular needs of these cases and programs.

The District's Competency Diversion Program was enacted through the Colorado Legislature in House Bill 24-1355 and Senate Bill 26-149. Because Mr. Baca was the judicial officer assigned to these caseloads, it was appropriate and necessary that he attend the training. However, Mr. Baca was not the only judge to receive such specialized training.

All judicial officers in the 6th Judicial District have attended professional development training over the 2026 calendar year, ranging in topics such as the dynamics of domestic violence, juvenile laws, probate, domestic relations, criminal procedure, and more. These trainings include—if not focus on—the concepts of trauma-informed decision-making. Furthermore, judicial officers are required to maintain a license to practice law, which necessitates continuing legal education in a variety of topics, including law, ethics, and diversity and inclusion (incorporating trauma-informed practice training). Mr. Baca is not, and was not, the only judicial officer in the district trained in these concepts and how they apply within the criminal justice system. Contrary to Mr. Baca's contention, every judicial officer applies these practices across their entire assigned caseload.

Dissolution of the Wellness Court and Other Problem-Solving Courts

Mr. Baca implies that the decision to dissolve the Wellness Court was not in the best interest of the community. This is an inaccurate statement.

The goal of the Wellness Court was to provide an integrated approach to substance addiction and criminogenic behavior through a structure that included the District Attorney's Office, the Public Defender, probation officers, and community service members such as mental health and treatment providers. However, the Wellness Court was dissolved due to low enrollment. Consequently, this focused, integrated approach was reaching very few of the people who could otherwise have benefited from that level of engagement.

Some problem-solving courts in the state judiciary must be accredited based on compliance with nationally recognized best practices. These best practices often establish strict eligibility guardrails (e.g., excluding someone with a first substance abuse charge, or conversely, someone with numerous previous convictions and aggravating charges) to manage the program population. In some communities, those best practices result in very low enrollment.

In the 6th Judicial District, we decided to take a different approach to incorporate a much broader group of potential participants. In collaboration with our probation department, we can now offer Wellness-Court-level services—such as treatment, rehabilitation, monitoring, and restorative services—to more people. We folded best practices that do not limit enrollment, such as frequent court appearances, judicial officer intervention, and expanded monitoring, directly into our standard operations for the individuals who need them.

The new model includes the same key partners who were engaged in the Wellness Court: The District Attorney's Office, the Public Defender's Office, probation officers, and community service members like mental health and treatment providers. So, while the moniker of "Wellness Court" may no longer be present, the purpose and commitment are as strong as before, with the added benefit of reaching more people.

While closing an accredited program did come with some costs—such as the loss of funding and an administrative staff position that managed the court, I believe our current ability to reach more people with specialized services is serving our community better and producing positive outcomes.

(It is also worth noting that Mr. Baca's focus on the problem-solving court ignores the fact that the Wellness Court constituted just a mere fraction of the total volume and breadth of cases in the 6th Judicial District. The judicial officers of the 6th Judicial District bring their trauma-informed training to all case types, a point omitted from the interview.)

Operation of DUI Courts

The DUI court in Montezuma County is still in full operation. It has operated continuously for the last 18 years under three different Montezuma County court judges and is one of the oldest DUI courts in the State of Colorado. The 22nd Judicial District did dissolve the Adult Drug Court Program. It was dissolved for many of the same reasons the Wellness Court in La Plata County was dissolved.

Conclusion

The judicial officers currently appointed in the 6th and 22nd Judicial Districts are committed public servants dedicated to the rule of law and the needs of the community. They are fully trained and capable of managing their dockets efficiently while handling each case with the uniqueness, sensitivity, and recognition of individual needs required. Mr. Baca's assertion that eliminating specialized problem-solving courts strips a judicial officer of their capacity to individualize justice—or forces a reversion to an “old, punitive model”—is patently inaccurate and frankly insults a sitting bench of independent constitutional officers. Every judicial officer retains full authority and a broad array of tools, statutory rules, and community resources to tailor every sentence, bond, or order to the unique circumstances of the case, proving that case individualization depends on the judicial officer, not the name of the court.

The community and the readers of *The Durango Herald* deserve to know the facts regarding programs in the district and certainly judicial officer aptitude, rather than rely on the opinions and feelings of a former employee.