

# PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

## Saving Lives and Reshaping Futures: Nevada's Specialty Courts

BY JULIE CAVANAUGH-BILL, PRESIDENT,  
STATE BAR OF NEVADA



**This month's issue of Nevada Lawyer focuses on one of the most important pieces of our legal landscape as our state and the county face an epidemic in drug, alcohol, and mental health issues. According to an article in the August 2023 edition of U.S. News and World Report, one out of every three Americans surveyed reported that they or a family member have been affected by drug and alcohol addictions. For those of us practicing in family law or criminal law, mental health and drug-related issues are constant.**

Through our specialty courts, we are able to redirect clients and give them the chance they need to recover and succeed in their lives. Our specialty courts are not just about drugs, alcohol, and mental health challenges, however. In Nevada, we have more than 65 specialty courts, ranging from the most well-known – the adult drug courts – to mental health, veterans, DUI, juvenile drugs courts, gambling diversion, and more.

The newest specialty court, initiated and overseen by Judge Sunny Bailey, is the Detention Alternative for Autistic Youth (DAAY) and is the first autism court in the country. Meeting leaders like Judge Bailey and having the opportunity to view these life-saving programs has been one of the greatest honors of my presidency with the State Bar of Nevada. These courts save lives and reshape the futures of our clients and communities.

As can be seen from the diversity of the courts themselves, Nevada's specialty courts are tailored to address specific needs within our communities. Forums aim to provide a more holistic and compassionate approach to justice, diverting participants from a penalty-based approach to rehabilitation and recovery. Be sure to read the personal stories featured in this issue by not only the judges who oversee these courts, but also the participants in them. These stories illustrate how important our profession is and how the system can work to lift up those in need. These stories will remind many of us why we pursued a career in the law in the first place.

I have had the distinct honor to assist many clients and their families through some of these programs, and my daughter is now in her sixth year of sobriety after her graduation from the Family Preservation Court in Elko. I believe the intervention of compassionate judges, third-party professionals, and a team approach to address her addiction is what saved her life. She would tell you the

same thing – Dave Loreman, one of our local attorneys who serves on the Family Preservation Court team, writes more about this local resource as our “Spotlight on the Rurals” author this month.

Given all these benefits, it is paramount for both legal professionals and the public to be aware of the existence and purpose of these specialty courts. They are not merely an alternative to traditional court proceedings; rather, they represent a paradigm shift in our approach to justice. By diverting individuals away from incarceration and toward programs that address the root causes of their involvement in the legal system, we contribute to the overall well-being of our community while simultaneously reducing the burden on our criminal justice system. The Administrator of Courts (AOC) and the Nevada Supreme Court have been instrumental in these programs, with the AOC providing funding for 62 specialty courts statewide under the guidance of a Specialty Court Committee headed by co-chairs Justices Lidia Stiglich and Linda Bell.

I encourage attorneys to familiarize themselves with the specific criteria and procedures of each specialty court so you can better guide your clients towards the most suitable forum. By doing so, we can actively contribute to the success of these programs and ensure that justice is not only served but also serves to rehabilitate and reintegrate individuals back into society.

Nevada's specialty courts are an indispensable asset in our pursuit of a fair and just legal system. They embody our collective commitment to innovative and compassionate approaches to justice. By actively engaging with and supporting these programs, we reinforce the principle that our legal system should not only punish but also heal and restore. Let us continue to champion the cause of justice and make Nevada a shining example of a legal system that truly serves its people.

As always, if you have questions about any other issue germane to our work as a state bar, I invite you to write to me with your questions and ideas. Please email me at [president@nvbar.org](mailto:president@nvbar.org). Thank you.

# SPOTLIGHT ON THE RURALS:

## The Health of Children and Families Centered Around “Healthy Family Program”

BY DAVID D. LOREMAN, ESQ.

The Family Preservation Court (FPC) in Elko (Fourth Judicial District) was established around 2011 under the leadership of the late district court Judge Andrew Puccinelli, district court Judge Mason Simons, Program Coordinator Margo Teague, Alana McKinney, the former director of the CASA program here in northeast Nevada, and Magistrate Michelle Rodriguez.

Around 2011, Elko County families found themselves in a dangerous situation due to the illegal drugs that were pervasive in the area at the time. The concerned professionals named above analyzed the community’s needs and created the Family Preservation Court. It was originally structured to handle 432B (child welfare) cases. Now it includes guardianships and will be expanded in the future to include a Juvenile Drug Court. The court has evolved over the years. Its original goal was to give families tools to help them become free of abuse, neglect, and illicit drugs, establishing a safe and stable home for the entire family. This plan was easier said than done. Addiction had a stranglehold on many of these families, and the FPC needed to go above and beyond to help them.

The FPC carefully considered how to best facilitate the goal of helping families be safe and

healthy, and it continues to modify its program to meet participants’ needs. At present, participants are offered wraparound family services including drug, alcohol, and mental health evaluations; counseling; referrals to inpatient treatment; assistance with temporary housing;<sup>1</sup> employment assistance; and ongoing monthly support from a team of professionals that participants can contact if they need assistance. The program has served many participants already. As the FPC expands into the Juvenile Healthy Family Program and the Healthy Family Program, it will continue to use a family-centered approach to tackle the dual issues of mental health and addiction.

FPC started with a focus on addiction. However, the court’s focus has expanded to include mental health support, as many specialty courts have found that without treatment for mental health, the chance of successful completion is reduced for a great number of families.

The Fourth Judicial District court is committed to supporting the FPC and other specialty courts in Elko County. It has promoted and encouraged staff and principles to attend many conferences on the subject

of specialty court programs. For example, the RISE program has provided many ideas to improve the specialty courts in Elko County. Importantly, the RISE program provides aftercare for its participants, even after conclusion of their formal attendance in the courts’ programs. It is critical to have someone available to assist participants after graduation.

The FPC is led by Rodriguez and Simons along with a team of therapists and other mental health professionals, the public defender, the assistant district attorney, a representative of the Division of Child and Family Services, Court Appointed Special Advocates, and an Attorney for the Children (myself).

For me, the children are the most important reason to work with specialty courts. These children love their parents and want them home to function as a loving family. I would go so far as to say that the children need their parents at home to care for them. Sadly, many parents cannot break away from their mental health concerns, which in many cases drive their drug addictions. I hope that the Healthy Family Program’s all-inclusive model will improve support for participants’ mental health as well as continue to provide them with tools to fight their addictions.

### ENDNOTE:

1. The FPC team is working diligently on finding improved transitional housing for all participants.

