

Securing Justice: Courthouse Safety

PRESENTATION TO THE COURTS, CORRECTIONS, AND JUSTICE COMMITTEE

CYNTHIA PACHECO, COURT OPERATIONS DIVISION DIRECTOR

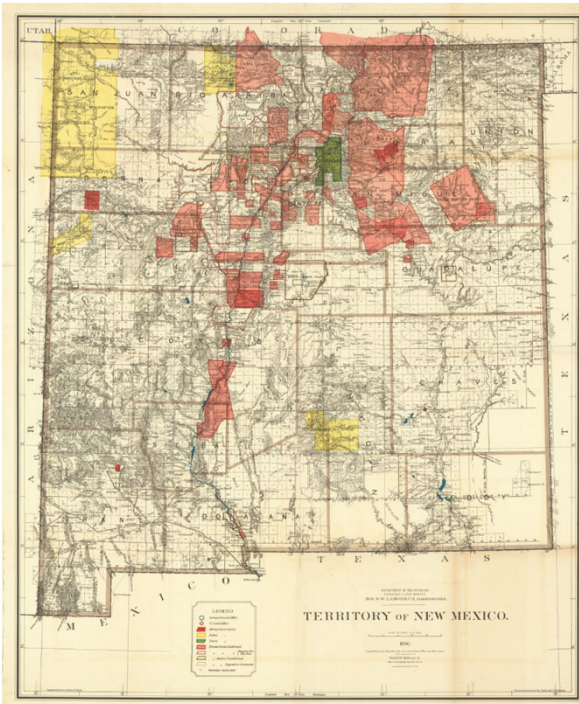
JULY 1, 2025

Agenda

- ▶ Historical Context of New Mexico Court Security
- ▶ Increasing Threats to the Judiciary Across the Country
- ▶ Minimum Standards for Court Security in New Mexico
- ▶ Recommendations

Security and the Courts – A Brief History

Pre-Statehood / 1846-1912



- ▶ Courts operated under US military governance post Mexican-American War.
- ▶ Security was minimal, often provided by local sheriffs or US Marshals.

Early Statehood / 1912-1959

- New Mexico Supreme Court established in 1912.
 - Supreme Court Building (1937) had no security features.
 - Local law enforcement was called to address any issues.
- 1950: NM Supreme Court Building becomes a designated fallout shelter.
 - Discussions about court security begin.



1960's to Present

- ▶ 1965 – Court of Appeals created, increased judicial activity required new thinking about security
- ▶ 1990's – Upgrades to the Supreme Court Building addressed ADA compliance and modernized some security features
 - ▶ Introduction of court security officers in larger courthouses.
- ▶ Post 9/11 security enhancements include metal detectors, security cameras, access control
- ▶ Metro Court was the first fully modernized court from a security perspective

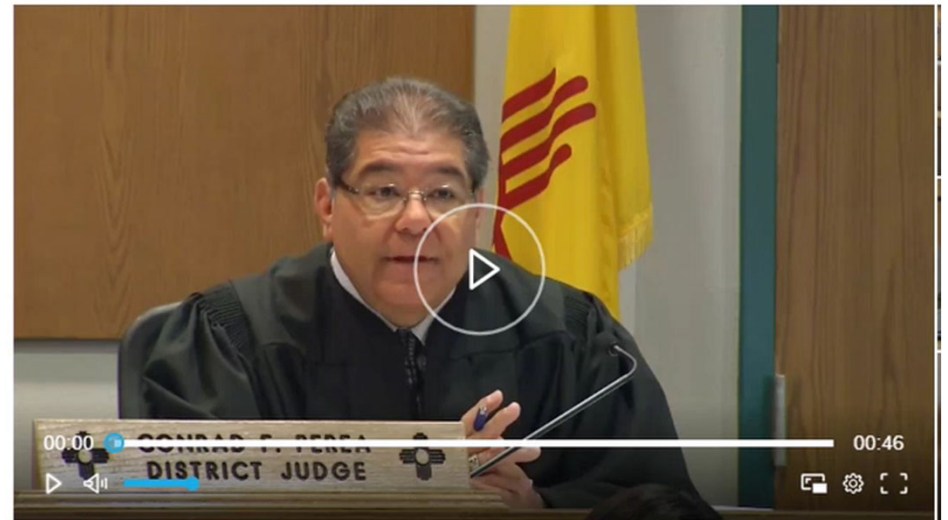
Courthouses were not always violent.



- ▶ State of Tennessee v. John Scopes – a/k/a “Scopes Monkey Trial”
- ▶ High profile trial with hotly contested issues.
- ▶ First trial broadcast over the radio.
- ▶ Spectators packed the courtroom and gathered outside.
- ▶ No security, no arrests, no admonitions.

2019 - Las Cruces

- ▶ State of New Mexico vs. Sigmund Gomez
 - ▶ Defendant objects to denial of release.
 - ▶ 7 deputies required to remove defendant.



Security and the Courts Today

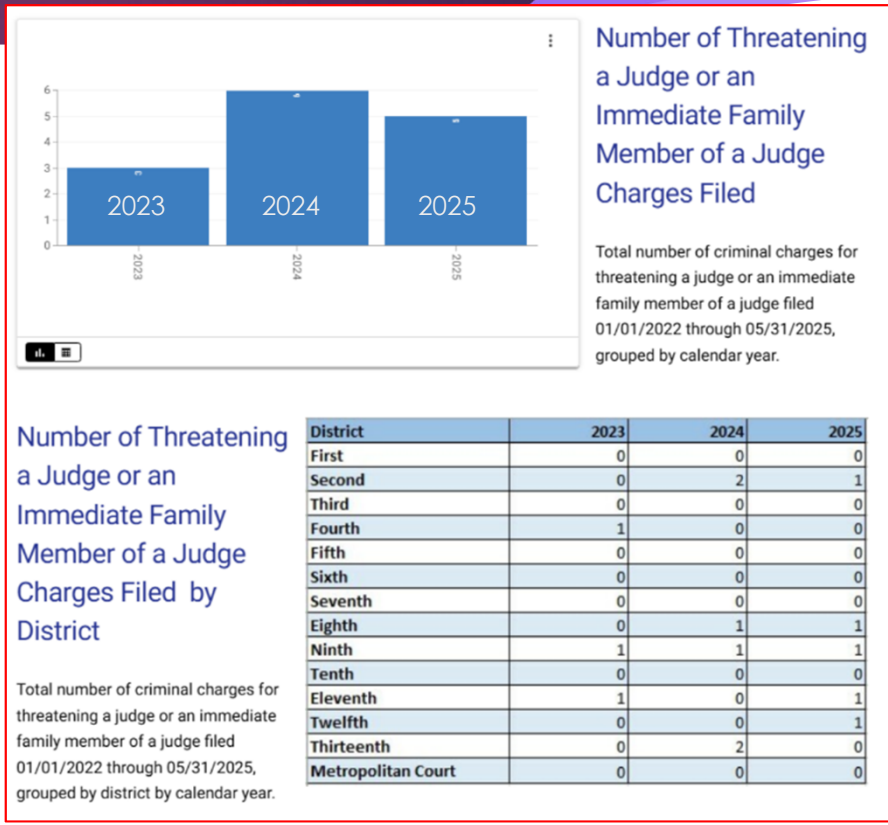
2025 – Albuquerque

- ▶ State of New Mexico vs. Alexander Ortiz
 - ▶ Routine pretrial hearing
 - ▶ Victim family attacks defendant.
 - ▶ Defendants family enters fight.
 - ▶ Security response: 1 minute, 18 seconds

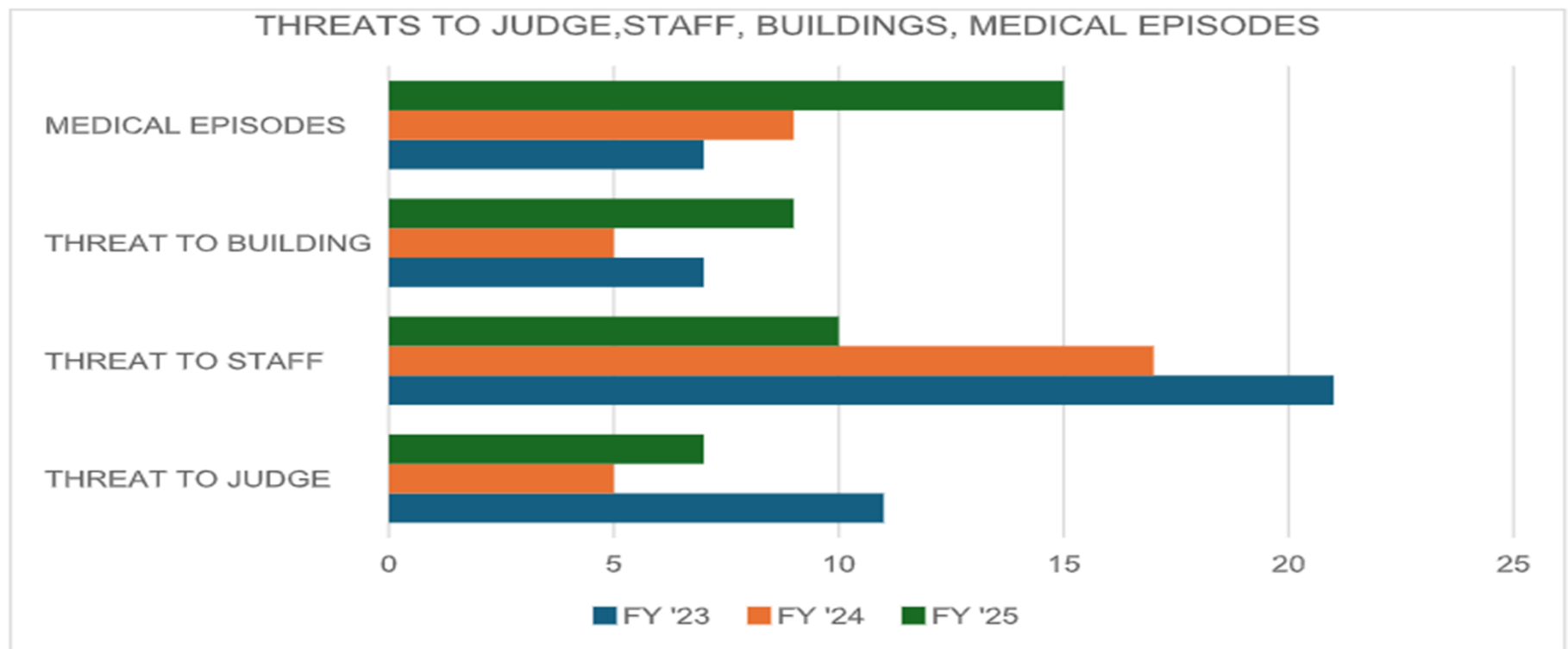


Increasing Threats to the Judiciary Nationwide

- ▶ US Marshal Service Data:
 - ▶ From 2021 to 2024, 104% increase in threats to judges nationwide.
- ▶ Trends:
 - ▶ Threats spike during election cycles and politicized cases.
 - ▶ Social media amplifies attacks, with personal information (doxing) exposing judges to harassment.
 - ▶ State judges face the same risks, especially in family and criminal courts.

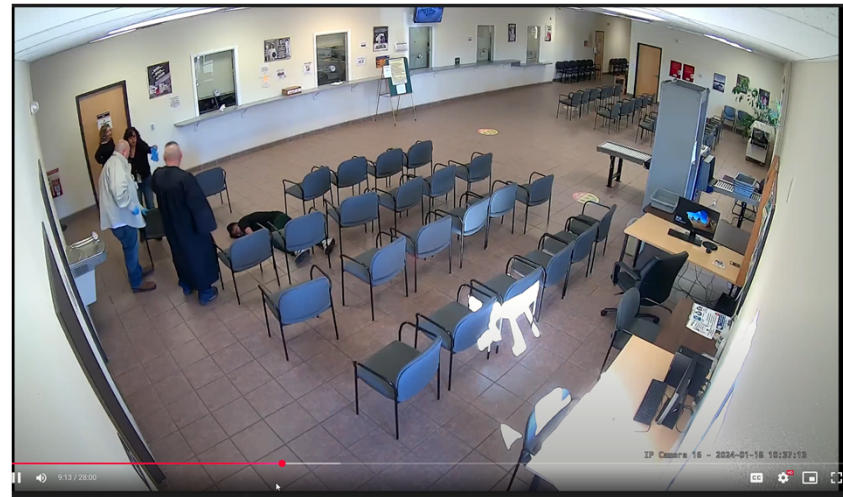


Threats are not just for Judges



Courthouses in the current environment is about more than guards and metal detectors.

- ▶ Rio Arriba Magistrate Court, 2024
 - ▶ Security Infrastructure, No Personnel
 - ▶ Defendant enters courthouse to complete paperwork and collapses due to an overdose.
 - ▶ EMS is called.
 - ▶ Judge and court staff intervene while waiting on EMS.
 - ▶ Court staff administers NARCAN while Judge disarms the defendant and clears the weapon.



Court Security and the Law

NMSA and Court Security

▶ DISTRICT COURT

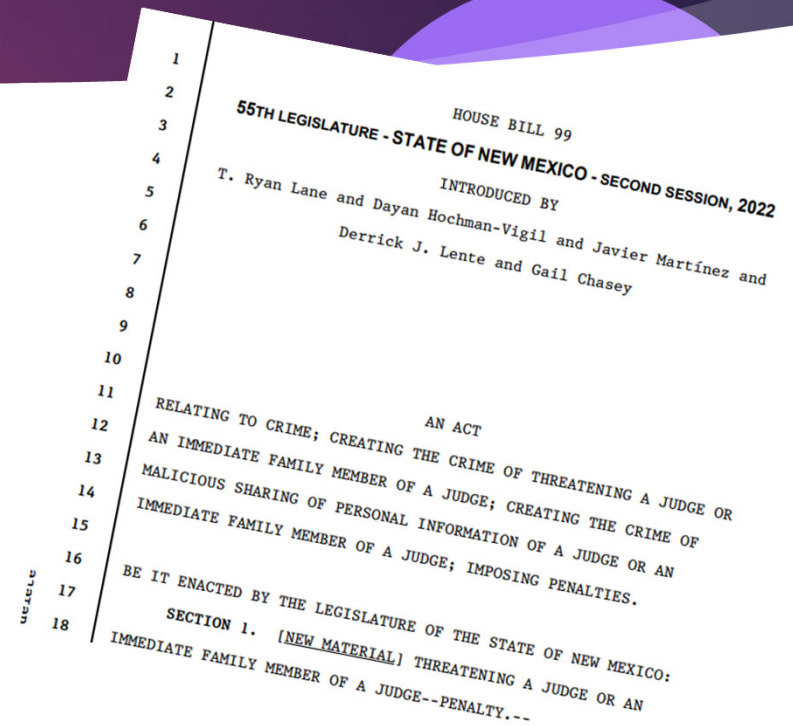
- ▶ Courthouses and security are provided by the county.
- ▶ Counties do not have dedicated funding to provide these services.
- ▶ When the legislation requiring counties to provide courthouses and security, the “county courthouse” was more than a court – it typically included all county offices. This is no longer the true.

▶ Magistrate and Appellate Courts

- ▶ Courthouses and security are funded by the AOC, the district, or both.
- ▶ AOC and appellate courts request appropriations from the legislature each year for these costs.
- ▶ Some magistrate courts are located in the county courthouses through lease agreements with the counties.

Threats to Judges and Malicious Sharing of Information

- ▶ May 18, 2022
 - ▶ Threatening a judge or an immediate family member of a judge becomes a 4th degree felony in New Mexico.
 - ▶ Malicious sharing of personal information of a judge or a family member of a judge becomes a misdemeanor in New Mexico.
 - ▶ Charged 14 times since inception.



Threats to a Judge

- ▶ January 30, 2023 **Angry defendant to judge: "I will see you at your next yard sale, I know where you live."**
 - ▶ Conviction
- ▶ August 8, 2023 **"Either you accept it or you fight me old man...if you refuse to step down...this is war."**
 - ▶ Conviction

Threats to a Judge

- ▶ December 31, 2023 **“I will throat (expletive) the judge, kill his wife, cook her corpse on the stove and eat it.”**
 - ▶ Dismissal by DA, lack of probable cause.
- ▶ April 11, 2024 **“That (expletive) judge is going to hang and I am going to make sure she does.”**
 - ▶ Defendant found incompetent to stand trial.
- ▶ June 25, 2024 **“I will find the Judge, beat him up, and kill him.”**
 - ▶ Defendant found incompetent to stand trial.

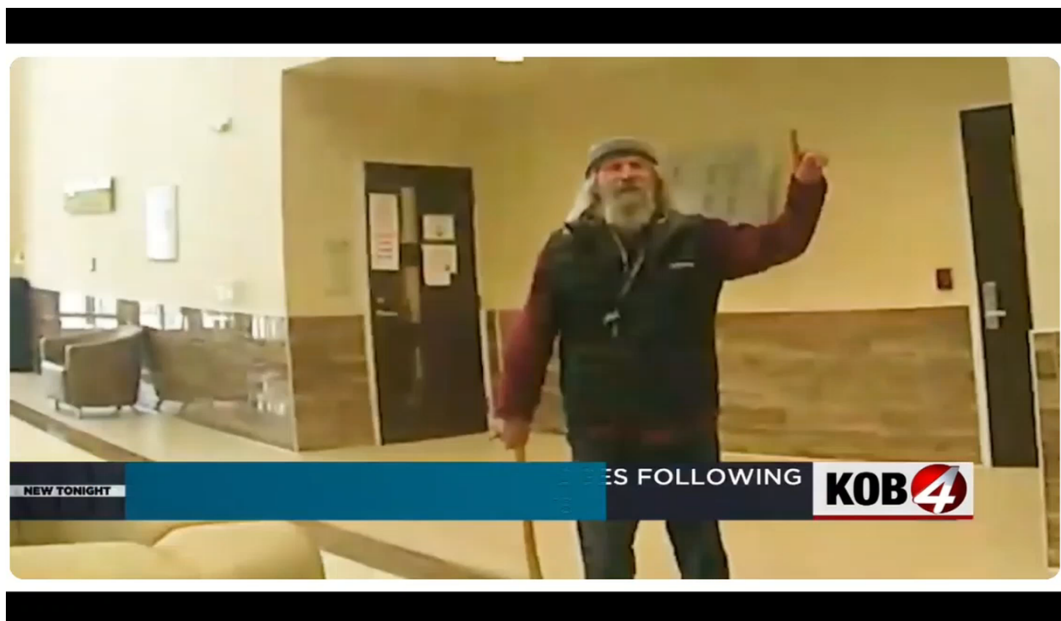
Threats to a Judge

- ▶ January 10, 2025 **Suspect runs judge off roadway, approaches his vehicle and screams “You’re dead, I am going to kill you.”**
 - ▶ Trial scheduled in August, 2025
- ▶ February 14, 2025. **Suspect threatens violence to multiple courthouses and acts of violence to specific judges.**
 - ▶ Trial proceeding in federal court.

Threats to a Judge

- ▶ April 8, 2024 **Suspect contacted a law firm and advised them he was going to kill a judge. Suspect later entered a courthouse with an axe.**

- ▶ Trial scheduled in September 2025





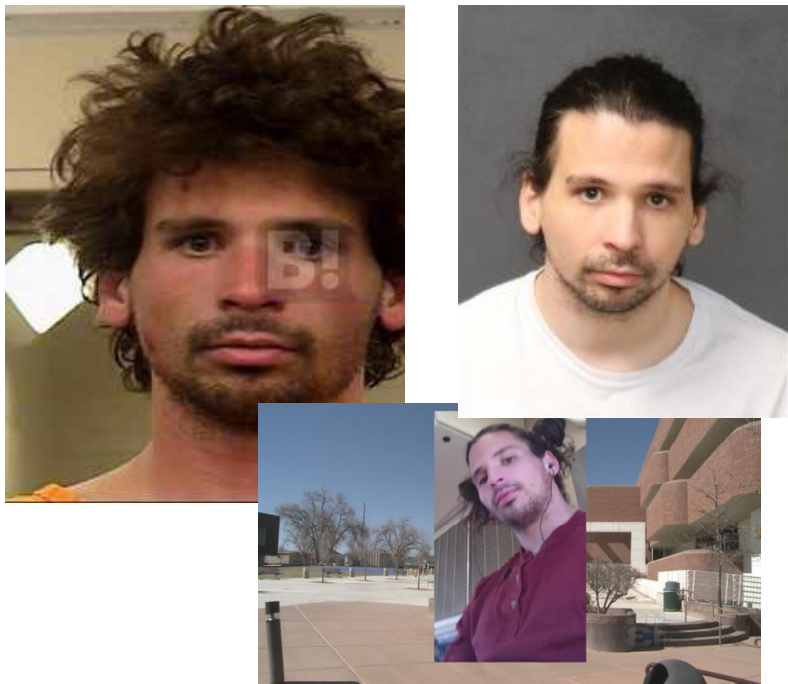
Challenges

THE DANGERS OF INADEQUATE
SECURITY

Caley Volante



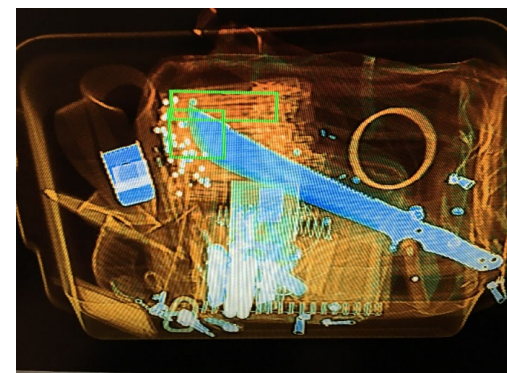
Mr. Volante continues to threaten judges across the state.



My intention was he was not leaving
 the magistrate ~~can't~~ that until he
 is ⁱⁿ ^{cost} locked to the prison though others
 are damn for me to shoot him and

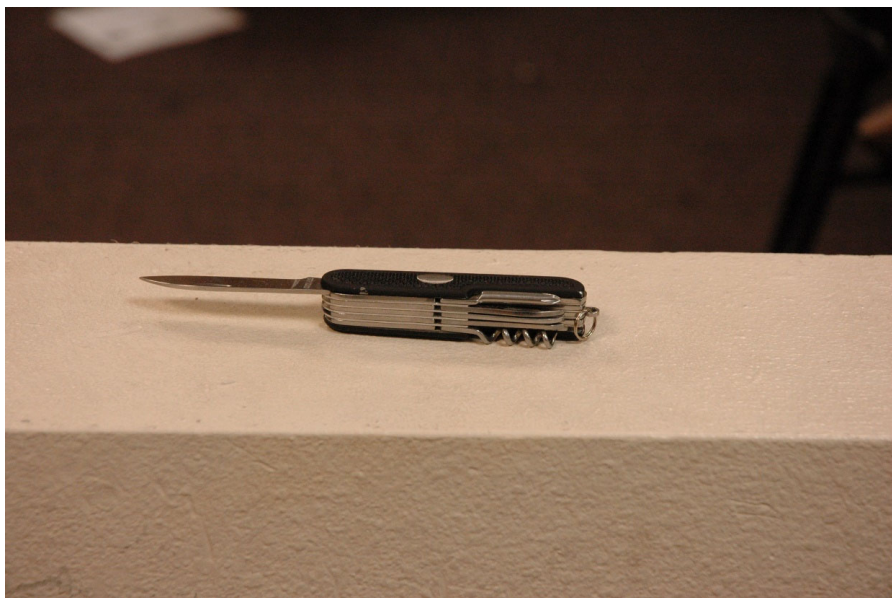
Weapons that would have entered the courthouse without security screening.

24



Tragedy Results when Security is Inadequate

25

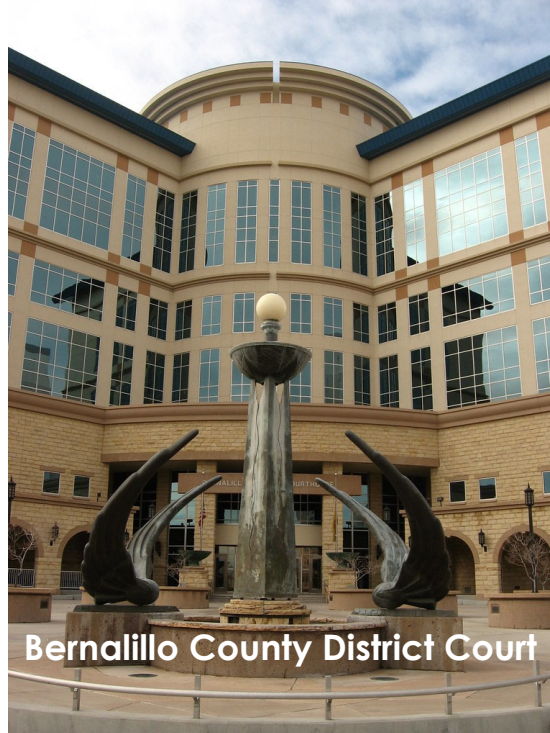


Challenges for Rural Courts

- ▶ Sheriff Department may not have sufficient staff to provide security.
- ▶ Differences in ideology may limit services to courts.
- ▶ Longer response times.
- ▶ Rural courthouses are often in historic buildings, limiting infrastructure and personnel.



Challenges for Urban Courts



- ▶ Increased numbers of people interacting in courthouses.
- ▶ Sheriff Department officers are certified law enforcement but may lack court security training.

What do the
Courts need?

...AND HOW THE
LEGISLATURE CAN HELP.

Best Practices for Court Security Infrastructure

- ▶ Magnetometers
- ▶ X-Ray Machines
- ▶ Duress Alarms
- ▶ Access Control
- ▶ Camera/Surveillance System
- ▶ Sally Ports for Inmates
- ▶ Detention Style Holding Cells
- ▶ Bullet Resistant Window Film
- ▶ Clerk Counter (Bank Style Pass Through)
- ▶ Bullet Resistant Wall Material for Clerk Counter Area
- ▶ Lockdown Button
- ▶ 2026 Request for Infrastructure: \$25,200,000
- ▶ Appropriation: \$6,000,000
- ▶ Upgrades will begin with the following counties:
 - Catron
 - Cibola
 - De Baca
 - Harding
 - Hidalgo
 - Rio Arriba
 - Sandoval
 - Santa Fe
 - Socorro
 - Union

Minimum Standards for Court Security Personnel

30

▶ Personnel

- ▶ Security present at all times when the court is open to the public
- ▶ Real time Threat Monitoring / Control Room

▶ Training and Certification in Court Security

▶ “Wish List”

- ▶ 2 - 5 FTE (depending on the size of the court) at screening station
- ▶ 1 FTE in each courtroom when hearings or trials are in session
- ▶ 1 -3 FTE to monitor security cameras
- ▶ Additional FTE as “cover units”

What should be next?

- ▶ Court marshals?
- ▶ Collaboration?
- ▶ Minimum standards for elected officials?