

**Interview of Erma Sedillo,
conducted by Peter Bochert on October 12, 2006**

Q Well, Erma, thank you very much for taking the time, obviously. I've interviewed Judge Knowles, and a similar set of questions, but modified obviously, for the newsletter we're going to give to the drug court conference attendees, so thanks again for your time. I've got you are Deputy Secretary of Operations for the New Mexico Corrections Department?

A Uh-huh.

Q Could you give us a brief working history leading up to your appointment or position with the Corrections Department?

A Oh, my God. You have 20-some years. Actually, I started almost 26 years ago in Corrections. It was October of 1980. And I'll go over this quickly. I mean, I won't bore you to death. But October of 1980, I started working for the department. I was going for my master's degree in counseling and was working at the Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce and decided that I wanted to go into a field that wasn't – didn't deal with juveniles.

But anyway, I started working as a secretary at the Los Lunas Correctional Facility, which is also known as "The Farm," as a secretary for the warden, which is kind of an – I tell people this because even though I have my degree, it was my way to get my foot in the door. I had already interviewed a couple of times for caseworkers, and this was after the 1980 riots, the February, 1980, riots, so they were hiring like crazy [inaudible].

But so I'd been turned down once or twice for caseworker jobs, so the warden, who happened to be a friend of mine, he and his family, said, "Well, why don't you just get your foot in the door by coming over here," and I did that for five months and then became a caseworker at Central New Mexico Correctional Facility right after it opened. It opened in July of '80, and they were ramping it up, you know, as far as bringing inmates back from around the country because they were housed elsewhere in jails and prisons around the country after the riot.

So, they were gradually bringing these inmates in just groups at a time, so they'd hire one caseworker for – or two caseworkers for two housing units, another set, and I was like the third run of caseworkers that was hired.

So, anyway, that was a real interesting time because I all these inmates were coming back from all over the country after being exposed to the riot and a lot of post trauma they were dealing with and a lot of trauma just being in another state, somewhere else in another prison, their cultures are different, that kind of stuff. So, that was a real interesting time for me.

And I worked four years as a caseworker and then moved on to Probation and Parole. I did that in Albuquerque for eight years.

And all of a sudden I decided to apply for a job as the community corrections administrator. I was kind of getting of Probation and Parole [inaudible], and the deputy director of Probation and Parole said there's a position that you can, you know, fill in for. We need this – we need somebody to fill in. The community corrections administrator is no longer there, so why don't you do this and just fill in and see if you like it or see what you think. So I did and for five months I was kind of TDY up here and they hired me.

They promoted me to community corrections administrator, which I did for six or seven years; I lose count. And that's the statewide program, overseeing 19 programs. I think there were 19 programs at the time statewide, both private and public operated programs.

And after that I became a region manager and worked in Roswell to handle the southeastern part of the state, had about 50 or so employees under me, \$3 million budget. It was big.

And then I took on the drug court coordinator and jury project manager for AOC, and then I got this position in January of '03.

Q January, '03?

A Yeah, January of '03 is when I became deputy secretary of operations.

Q So you've been with Corrections and for – a number of years with Corrections --

A Around the state, yeah, yeah.

Q – with the Administrative Office of the Courts.

A I've been with the state – this is what I tell people. I've lived in the state almost now – almost 26 years. It'll be 26 years in January. Almost 26 years. A year and a half of that was with the courts, and the rest was with Corrections.

Q Well, given that background, somewhere in there you first heard about drug courts.

A Uh-huh.

Q What was your initial reaction? When did you first hear about them and what was your initial reaction?

A When Judge Knowles called me, I was the community corrections administrator up here in central office. And Judge Knowles, who I knew, I'd known since he was a public defender, defense attorney – I think it was public defender. But anyway, I knew him anyway. I knew when he became judge. After he became a judge, he called me and said, "There's this program," and he told me about drug courts.

And so I said, "Okay."

"You know, there's this meeting going on in Albuquerque. Would you like to attend?"

And I said, "Okay. Let me tell my boss."

And my boss said, "What is it?"

And I said, "I don't know. It just sounds good and I can't explain what drug courts are, but let's just go anyway."

It sounded real good, and that's exactly what I said. I said, "It sounds like a good idea, but I can't explain it," because I really couldn't after the Judge explained it to me. I thought, "Oh, wait a minute. I don't really think I know what he's talking about."

So we went to the meeting. The director of Probation and Parole went to the meeting with me. And that's when people from the county jail were there, Metro Court. I remember Judge Gomez or somebody was there from Metro Court. District attorneys, public defenders. It was a nice group of people. I think – I don't even know if APD – but anyway, law enforcement maybe was there.

And I remember meeting in one of the courtrooms and we kicked it off there. This was like – when did I start? I think it was in '05, I think it was; and then we went – I remember Bennina was there, Armijo-Sisneros. But anyway, we went – we got – you know, this was like a planning grant or something, so we got to go to Vegas to see Clark County's drug court. I can't remember what else. I think that was the only trip we took. So that gave us a really good idea of how it worked. This whole group of people went.

It's like a planning group committee, so we all had to go to that.

And then I read in the paper that drug courts were going to start in September of '05. I read about it in the paper and I said, "Oh, my gosh."

Q Do you mean '95?

A Yes, I'm sorry. Yeah, yeah.

Q That's okay.

A What, did I say '05? I said '05. Anyway, '95, yeah.

So I said to my boss, I said, "You know, we've got to get this thing going. This is already July." I think it was July when I said, "We've got to get somebody, you know, assigned or something to it."

And he said, "Well, we can do the interview process and that kind of stuff."

I said, "No, we don't have time. Just trust me." I always told him, "Just trust me on this one."

So I put Walt Lang – you know, and I didn't know Walt Lang, but I was trying to think of somebody who might want to do it, and I thought of Walt first of all, and I thought maybe somebody else. So I went to Walt. I actually went to his boss and then we called Walt in. He said, "Well, give me 24 hours to think about it."

It was like, "Oh, my God. All our plans just went down the tube," I thought. What if he says "no," because [inaudible] plans. And I found out later he was just as excited about it. So, I mean, he had to talk to his family member or something. But anyway, he accepted it, and that was the best thing I could have done was put him there because – and he was just a PO assigned to drug court. That's all he was.

We were able to get City funding, I think, for treatment through the City. So, it was a real, real true collaboration.

And then after that, we were able to hire another PO in there through another grant, I believe, and that was Millie Sanchez. But anyway, so there were two people working drug court and we managed to get the funding through the LFC and through the Legislature for the positions.

But then after that we started drug court in – and all the judges were like, "I want to start a drug court and I heard you were involved in one." So they called me, and we managed to get – I went to some planning meetings with Judge Herrera in the First. Judge Harry Valdez was adamantly opposed to it, and now he isn't.

But anyway, just to [inaudible] we finally got to the point where I could manage to do some creative funding and we utilized Community Corrections dollars to help get that started. I don't think I could get fired over that now, but anyway, because it was just a creative way – I remember the meeting at the JVs or I don't know, trying to plan this out, you know, how we were going to do this with Community Corrections dollars and stuff, and we were able to put a PO over there. So once again, I got –

Q With the First?

A With the First. We managed to put a PO over there who was brand new, who had been working at the pen, and that was – what's his name – Andy Pena. So he was working at the pen, and he hadn't started in his PO job, and I said, "He's the perfect one because he doesn't have a caseload." So, we assigned him to drug court.

And then Judge Onuska from Farmington said, "I heard that you were doing this," and Judge Harrison back then. And so we managed to reassign a PO for Farmington and put some Community Corrections dollars over there, too. So that's how we got those

three felony drug courts started.

Q Well, you've used the term "creative funding," and collaboration. And back when the one with Judge Knowles started up back in '95, I think there were only 35 to 40 drug courts nationwide at the time.

A I remember that, yeah.

Q So that was the beginning of the drug court movement. Now there's over 1,600.

A Yeah.

Q So what I'm curious about is back then in olden times, the beginning of the drug court movement 10, 15 years ago, you had challenges that had to be overcome in starting those programs.

A Oh, yeah.

Q There was [inaudible] collaboration, which is not old hat yet, but it's still more of an established pattern in New Mexico, certainly, than it was back then.

A Uh-huh.

Q And the funding issue, which is always a problem. Do you see any – I'm just curious about the challenges you faced back then. Do you think somebody starting a drug court today has the same challenges or different challenges.

A I think in some ways, Peter, but we have blazed the trail. We truly are trailblazers in getting the word out. I think the Association has done a great job. I think, you know, we can still do more of that. But going out there and talking to these people and telling them – you know, especially Judge Knowles, I mean, it works. And to have somebody from Corrections say it work because – or it can work. Because back then, it was like even my own people, meaning Corrections people, "Absolutely not. We're going to lock them up as soon as we see them act funny and we're going to put them on electronic monitors," which is fine. But I had a lot of – especially in the Fifth. I wanted to start one in Roswell, and I had such resistance from over there.

They even met Judge [inaudible]. He came here when he was alive, and Judge – I'm sorry – Mayor Chavez was there and everything. We had those people from the Fifth come in and the judges were opposed to this drug court thing.

Q The judges in the Fifth?

A Yeah, one of the judges in the Fifth. I don't know if it was Francoeur or something like that. I can't remember. But anyway, they were adamantly opposed to it. But I was just getting Tom Rutledge, the DA, and the region manager from Probation and Parole back then, I was just getting them kind of softened up to it, and the judge opposed it. It was like you don't have a full contingency backing you up, forget it.

But I still see some of it, but not as bad. You know, it's not quite as bad. I think people want to start more like mental health courts and those kind of specialty ones. But I don't think it's quite as bad. I think we have blazed the trail. Family drug courts, it's hard work; but I think truly this group has helped.

Q I'm curious because within Corrections, I can see that people would be more opposed to a – you know, what's been called a Hug-a-Thug or Touchie-Feelie program, at least in the early days.

A Yeah.

Q Were you just able to overcome that by just saying let's give it a try, or was there certain evidence or other things working in your favor [inaudible] Corrections?

A You know, Peter, that's a good question because there was a tiny factor. I was so lucky

to have a boss who was open-minded, a director of Probation and Parole. And to be quite honest with you, I can't even remember who the secretary of Corrections was, because they really kind of let us do our own thing because that's why we were always called stepchildren anyway. But they kind of let us do our own thing. So that was kind of nice to have a boss who really believed in me and believed that, "Well, if you say it's a good idea, it's a good idea." Had I not had a boss like that, I don't think I –

Q And I forget if you mentioned it. Who was your boss back then?

A. He was Alan Schuman (sp?). Alan Schuman was the director of Probation and Parole at the time, and I was the community corrections coordinator. But we had known each other. He was a caseworker back in the old days. So it's like we almost grew up together but never worked in the same facility together but knew each other. And so he trusted my judgment. So it was really about timing. I was really, really lucky. Had other administrations been in place, no, I wouldn't have even gotten to the first square, first [inaudible].

Q Well, one of the arguments or just kind of background information we give nowadays is the fact that so many people that become incarcerated or are probationers or parolees, 60, 80 percent were under the influence of drugs or had substance abuse issues when they come into the criminal justice system.

A Right.

Q And so often the studies show that straight incarceration, they're often reoffending within a year or three years of getting out of prison.

Were they talking about those numbers like that back then?

A Oh, yes.

Q It seems to be kind of common knowledge now.

A Uh-huh.

Q Or it's not as much an argument as just people accept that kind of information, but –

A Yeah. They were talking about it back then, too. I don't think they were talking about it in the same way as reentry, to actually put all the pieces together and – as a group, you know, to help them out, you know, with a collaboration or with just the reentry initiative. That wasn't a buzzword back then. We did have like pre-release programs, but the focus wasn't so much on the person, the individual. It was on what projects or what programs or what ideas – it wasn't about the person himself – him or herself. That's what I notice with drug courts. It's very individual.

Q And that's something I talked – as I mentioned to you before, I interviewed Judge Knowles earlier this week or last week. And, of course, I was talking more – he was, you know, the judge of a specific, and still is, of a specific program. So we were talking about his program and its effect on him.

I'm curious. You weren't running a program, but your involvement with Corrections, did any of your involvement with drug courts bleed over in some way into the policies, procedures, attitudes that you tried to incorporate either at the time in the Corrections, Community Corrections or later on now as deputy secretary of Corrections, has it affected the way you look at treating substance abusing offenders?

A Yeah. I think it affected this administration more than anything because – because of recidivism, we are giving them more chances. And it's working. It's actually changing the mindset with the POs and saying, "Work with them." And that's what I think drug court does. It actually works with the person, the individual. And that's – I'm not saying

it's a full success, but I'm just saying that we had to change our mindset and to actually start working with these people individually to help them stay out, even though they have four or five dirty urines sometimes, keep them in the community.

What we're doing now is another project, the community restorative justice or [inaudible] panels getting the community involved. And that's the missing link for Corrections right now is the community.

So, yes, it has changed us. It has changed the way we think. I've had to educate people on drug courts in Corrections over and over and over again. But now with reentry drug courts, yes, we're hitting the jackpot now if we can get these going. That's when Corrections really will be involved more so in drug courts.

Q Maybe we can – I had that down in here as a question, but why don't we skip to that.

I know you've been trying to establish a reentry drug court in New Mexico, and I understand you've had some success with that. Could you briefly talk about what the purpose of a reentry drug court is and where you are on your implementation?

A Yeah. Reentry drug courts were established a few years ago. I don't know the exact date, and I could pull the statute. In fact, I probably have it right here.

Q I think it was in the 2003 Legislative Session.

A Okay. We were established actually by the Women's Justice Project, or they were the ones who were pushing this to help female offenders get out early. And what it is – and it doesn't say that in the statute, though. It's a way to allow substance abusing offenders to get out of prison up to 18 months early – non-violent offenders up to 18 months early. And the whole point was to help them reintegrate slowly back into the community. And if they went to a drug court, that would be like a step-down process for them.

So, there's no funding involved except I did get some Value Options money, a very small amount, to help with the reentry treatment. Our Probation and Parole officers would actually still supervise and will do all the processing of committees and processing the people through. But it's an arduous process and it still continues to be one.

We still haven't gotten anybody in the program, but we're lessening our restrictions; our criteria has changes somewhat where it will open up the pool of applicants.

That's another issue, and I'm dealing with it actually today. An e-mail came to me saying, "Do not do anything with reentry drug courts" – this is a lower level employee – "we're not going to do anything with these reentry drug courts." And so I've got a copy of the e-mail. I'm like, "Oh, no." Because the secretary fully supports reentry drug courts.

I don't know that other administrations would have supported a reentry drug court. This secretary fully supports it. And because – to be quite honest with you, Peter, there's not that many people in Corrections – I can count on my hand – that really knows and pushes drug courts. You know, I mean, really. And I'm not trying to brag. I'm just trying to say that if I didn't push this, I don't think anybody else would really be pushing it. Maybe, you know, a little bit; but to the point where we've actually set meetings with the AOC and the courts and the judges to actually say, "What do you think?" I don't think that would have happened.

I know it's been a tedious process and we're still not there and we're so close to being there. But they will get started. But I think that's changing the way we're thinking about how we're doing stuff, the reentry stuff, the reentry drug courts. So that's

promising, but it's just going to be a handful.

And we learned that from Clark County, too. They have a reentry drug court. It's slow and it's going to be a slow start, but then it will pick up eventually. So we'll have to ask for dollars through the Legislature.

Q As far as you don't have anybody in reentry drug court, are you targeting specific locations such as the Albuquerque, the Second Judicial District adult drug court?

A Yes, yes. We are because there are POs who are there and the treatment dollars are accessible right now because we're working out the BAR through Value Options. But, yes, we are targeting Albuquerque. I still want to look at Las Cruces – I need to talk to you about this, but now is not the time – Las Cruces and Taos, and see how we can get them involved as well, again, because Judge Nelson and Judge Cano-Garcia is gone. But I need to talk to you about that, see how we can get them involved again. But Albuquerque is the focal point right now.

Q Okay. It sounds like part of the challenge there when you talk about being the only real voice, proponent of drug courts in the Corrections Department, that there's still the – I can't remember the phrase, but you haven't quite sold Corrections on the benefits to the Corrections Department of drug courts and/or reentry drug courts. Am I stating that correctly? And if so, what do you see the benefits to the Corrections Department of this kind of program, either out there in the world as in drug courts or affiliated with Corrections like reentry drug courts?

A You know, I think if there were an evaluation that really, you know, just – and this would be another evaluation that somebody could do on the Albuquerque one in particular or even our offenders, showing that they didn't come back or they took longer to come back, I think that would be a good selling point for the administration.

Q So the reduction in recidivism, basically?

A Yes. Yeah, showing that it works. So right now, I can't really say that. I can just say – and trust me. By having Joe go to the graduations and the Governor and all that – but having Joe go, the secretary, yes, he's sold on it. He is truly sold on it.

It's just a matter of – you know this is, Peter. If you don't get it done, nobody is going to do it for you.

Q Right.

A Everybody's so busy. And I don't know where drug courts really fit in. Do they fit into Probation and Parole? Yes, they do. Do they have time to do it? No, they don't. You know? So I'm kind of like – I know. It's one of those – reentry drug courts is part, you know, institution; part Probation and Parole, too. So we work together on it.

But I tell you what: No matter how hard you try to pull these people together, they're still, "Well, I don't know. I don't think it's going to work," or, you know, there's still that kind of skepticism. Even though they have a track record, everybody loves it, I think we just need to get the hard facts.

Q I've often seen kind of the dynamics of the team being held together in one way or another by a common belief, by the willpower of the judge. And if one of those components is missing, they tend to be pulled back to their home territory. The treatment provider goes back and they aren't – you know, they're not as eager to share information on drug abuse by one of their participants because they're protecting the rights of their participants.

A Yeah, yeah.

Q The PO officer is more reluctant to share information.

A Yeah, Las Cruces was an example of that.

Q So that dynamics of the collaboration, I think, is always a difficult thing to maintain.

A Uh-huh.

Q With reentry drug courts, I guess it's a – I guess I see it as a little more closely affiliated with Corrections and maybe that part of the dynamics hasn't really been established yet like drug court programs have, which are, I think, kind of generally thought of as judicial programs and it's up to the Judiciary to get the funding and to pull it together. Bodies might change, but the program is going to maintain.

You've got a slightly different challenged with the reentry drug courts because I'm not so sure they're seen in the same way as a Judicial program but more of a Corrections program.

A Right, yes. Yes, we do petition to the court. We have to make a petition to the court to – like we've already done the screening process for the courts, and then they ultimately decide. So it is a good joint team effort, I know that. But, yes, the onus is more on the Corrections Department.

But I do want to address the fact that, yeah, POs right now, Probation and Parole officers have such heavy-duty caseloads that having a caseload of 30, which is not mandated by law, the statute, for Albuquerque, I mean, I would want to be a drug court PO right now because of his load is only 30. Other people are – you know, we did away with intensive supervision everywhere but Albuquerque because the caseloads were so small. They're mandated by law to have only 20, by law.

So, I mean, everybody else has under 50, so we had to do away when I was region manager, do away with the intensive supervision caseload because it wasn't fair. They're sitting around going, "Yeah, life is great. I have 15 people in jail. I only have 5 people to" – you know. I mean, it's just the fairness of it all, the inequity.

But I can still see that with – say Las Cruces. They're going, "Gosh, you know, I've got so many cases and I still have to deal with drug court," because it's time consuming. It does require you go to the judge and stuff and actually spend time in the hearing or whatever.

Q The staffing [inaudible].

A Yeah, the staffing and all that stuff. However, once you get past all the complaints, you really do like it. You go to these small district offices around the state – Hobbs with family drug court or any other ones, they love it. They love drug courts. But you never hear from these people because they're out in the hinterlands and they're doing their job and they're doing it really well.

So, some people in the bigger communities tend to squawk a little bit louder. And I get that a lot in Corrections is – these guys like in Taos, just doing great. And even with Judge Nelson gone, it's still doing great. You know, in other areas, they're doing fine. Even with Probation and Parole going, "Oh, my gosh, I've got a big caseload." But they have that rapport with the judge anyway in the small communities. They have that rapport with, you know, the treatment – they have a good rapport. But in the bigger areas, it's a little bit more difficult.

Q Interesting.

A It is.

Q It suggests something about how to get the word from the rural communities or the

smaller communities back to the bigger communities by the way of helping to support, promote, shore up the current programs and that collaborative effort. And I don't think we do right now.

A I don't think so, either. And as far as Corrections, I think we tend to forget about the small communities. They do a lot, a lot more than the specialized areas like Albuquerque. We tend to forget they're out there, and it's so sad. It really is. I find fault with not doing that – with us for not doing that. But anyway, it's just one of those things.

But, yeah, I think the smaller drug courts are really, really the – the real successful ones. I'm not saying that Metro and all them aren't. They're [inaudible] doing their own thing. But those little ones, they have their heart and soul into it. They get to know that client really, really well.

Q I wonder – you were instrumental in helping set up the New Mexico Association of Drug Court Professionals.

A Uh-huh, yeah.

Q And establishing the annual conference that they hold. We're coming up on the Ninth Annual Conference here at the end of October. Obviously the intent of that conference is to bring together drug court professionals from around the state. Do you think there's a way to use that conference to give voice to some of the positive aspects of the drug court programs or the positive aspects of collaboration in the smaller communities and use the conference as kind of a forum to share that with the larger – the urban centers that are also represented at that conference?

A I think the drug court conference – and I'll just go back to that first year that – we had a big meeting here at Corrections because I remember we went to our first drug court national conference and the congress were held at the same time. I guess they still are.

Q Uh-huh.

A I don't remember where it was – LA or somewhere. But anyway, we came back and Judge Hall was at the meeting. That auditorium was full, and you came back and, you know, that's when we decided to start the association. And they elected – they all of a sudden said, "Well, okay, let's do elections." And the Judge Hall was the first president and I was the first vice president. You know, we didn't know what we were doing, but, you know – and I can't remember who else was – I think Bennina was the first treasurer.

But anyway, that was interesting that that's how it got started. And it's so funny, I look back on it and I'm like, "Gosh, we really were kind of trailblazers." But anyway, yes, it's the best forum to bring people together. I know these people like coming together and talking drug courts because it's almost like a cult thing because nobody else understands it but them. You know, it was one of those things were we did get some money to actually have the first conference, I think. I think. Yeah, we actually got some money from the Feds.

Q I was wondering where our bank account came from.

A That's what started our bank account, and that's what helped us tremendously. So it was really kind of a neat time, I remember. But anyway, yeah, that's a great forum for it. I know some people don't get to go to national conferences, and I kind of feel bad for them, but once they go, they're going to see that ours is much better, as well.

Q Well, it's easy to get lost. I mean, they had over 3,000 attendees at the one in Seattle this year. So, it's just like moving into a small city where everybody's on the move and shuffling from one room to the next. I didn't go to this one, but I heard it was 3,000. I

know it was 2,500 the one I went to last year. And it's just kind of overwhelming, just the sheer number.

A It is. I remember when I went to the one in LA and I was just in awe of it because it was just so big. A lot of people went to it from New Mexico, too. It was cool.

Q Well, a number of other questions here. Let's just kind of see which ones sound of interest.

Do you have any favorite stories about a drug court participant?

A When I saw that, I couldn't think of anybody who really stood out. But the ones that would speak at the drug court conference, those are the ones who stand out to me because they're so nervous and this is such an honor, and those are the ones who really bring back the spirit of drug courts. Even the kids, I mean, the kids were wonderful at speaking out. And I don't have a particular one because I can't think off the top of my head. But those ones just really inspired us because we're like, "Okay. Now we're back to we can talk about money and how to get things started and stuff, but this is the reason for the season kind of thing. This is it."

Q I'm always impressed by those people who aren't – obviously are not trained in any kind of public speaking. The last thing they want to do in the world is get up in front of a group, and they're actually getting up to talk about something that many people hide the fact that they abused, had an addiction and had to go through whatever to overcome it. I mean, there's always shame and guilt and other very strong negative emotions attached to that process, and yet these people actually volunteer to get up and talk about what drug courts – the before and the during and the after drug court. It just tells you so much about the quality and the life-changing nature of the program that they're willing to do that.

A Those are the people that truly inspire me. But the graduates, too. You go to a graduation, you know, they're kind of dressed up. It's almost like a real graduation. It just brings goose bumps to me. It really does. I mean, I haven't gone to very many lately because I've been so busy, but those are the kind of things where it goes back to where the root of the whole matter – I mean, this is why we're here. It's just so neat.

And to meet judges like Cano-Garcia and Knowles and Nelson and all the others – Judge Herrera, he just relied on me completely. It's like, "Erma, you're the reason – I mean, without you, we're not going to get this started." I mean, it was all on me. And to think back that I had that kind of support from the Department to just do it was really cool. Really, it was really because of us that we got the one started in Santa Fe. And I just went out on a limb. Truly, we wouldn't do that today. Truly, it would not happen. And it was just like I said, it was all about timing.

But to have those people, it takes a judge to pull the drug court together, no doubt.

Q Maybe you could use that in answer to this next question. If somebody wants to start a drug court, and, of course, it can start from a number of different – public defenders, treatment provider in an area or a judge – what advice would you give to somebody who wants to start a drug court today?

A Well, I would definitely get the planning grant if they still have those. But I would get us, the Association, to help them out because there's so much experience now. I mean, Peter, you've got a wealth of experience now. You've been here a few years. And just us old-timers to say this is what not to do and this is what to do.

When we went to Clovis that time, I was so impressed, I mean, to have that many people there, for one thing. But they had already done a lot of preliminary stuff, which I

thought was cool. But we'll certainly help them – we did the one in Taos. I remember we went – I don't know if you were here. I think maybe Lisa was. Maybe I was; I don't know. Maybe I was the coordinator.

But we went to Taos and we got that one started. So, I mean, to help them as a community. And they had State Police there, they had a bunch of people. I think, you know, they lay the groundwork by talking about it themselves; but we'll certainly help them more than anything. But I think those planning grants are the best. It's hard.

Q What are some of the challenges you see to the continued growth of drug courts in New Mexico, let's say?

A I think it's just funding, I think, more than anything. I think the interest I there. I think more and more I'm hearing more about mental health courts, which I think Fitzwater at Metro is just opened up that. I just think the world of those kind of programs. But – and then the family drug courts. I think those are going to be hard. But it's just the funding issue and to show that we're keeping this many people out of prison or they're not going to prison as a result, just the stats and stuff.

But I think Senator Snyder, oh, my gosh. We owe everything to her almost. But just that kind of buy-in or that kind of belief and that commitment. You have it. You already have it. I mean, it's there. Even if I retire and Judge Knowles retires and all this, we'll still be committed to drug courts, no doubt.

Q Well, that was my next question. Do you plan to remain involved with drug courts?

A Only if you guys want me. But, yeah, I would. In fact even at a local level, if I'm just like a regular Judy Q. Citizen or whatever. You know, I'll be on a panel or I'll be on whatever. I'll do what I can.

Q Well, great.

A Yeah.

Q Erma, thank you very much for answering the questions I dreamt up. Is there anything else you'd like to say about your involvement with drug courts or the other kinds of programs that are developing based on the drug court model?

A It's just evolved in New Mexico. And everybody says, well, New Mexico is always 20 years behind. Well, we're not 20 years behind. And we did this before the most recent progressive administration. And Governor Richardson has helped with this, but we did this even before that with a Republican administration. And don't put that in there, but – but anyway, with a conservative administration. But anyway –

Q That administration definitely wasn't – at least Governor Johnson was not conservative as related to drugs because he actually was a national proponent for legalizing some drugs.

A Yeah, that's true. Yeah.

Q That doesn't really –

A That doesn't reflect the whole state.

Q Right.

A That doesn't reflect the whole state. That reflected Governor Johnson. But, no, I think New Mexico, we're a small state and I think we have a lot to brag about. I really do. There's nothing to hold your head down anymore. We can hold our heads up and say, "Wow. This is quite a feat."

But it couldn't have happened without a team, and the team that was brought together by Judge Knowles and Judge Herrera and then Judge Onuska and Judge

Harrison, they were calling me all the time, “When are we going to get our drug court started,” that kind of thing. And the right people, you know. Brad was eventually put over there, Brad Ullrich, and he started working for the courts. But it wasn’t a good program at Farmington until Brad took it over. So it is the right connection because the person there before was – anyway. I won’t go there. But the right people at the right time, it’s just amazing how it works out.

But, yeah, I can see it evolving into more mental health drug courts, reentry drug courts finally, family drug courts. I think family drug courts are really great. And whatever else comes along, you know. It’s as creative as you want to be.

So, Peter, you’ve got quite a lot to do, I’m sure. But you’ve done a lot for us already. I appreciate it.

Q Well, and thank you, Erma, for being obviously one the key right people at the right place at the right time. We have this drug court movement in New Mexico. Thank you very much.

A It wasn’t even about recognition. It was about, “God, it’s such a great idea,” you know, once I got it, once I figured out what Judge Knowles was talking about. It was like, “We can’t say no to this. We just can’t.” So, yeah, it was all about just timing, I think, and luck. A lot of luck.

Q Well, Erma, as a pioneer of – one of the pioneers for the drug court movement in New Mexico, thank you very much for your time.

A You bet, Peter.

Q And we’ll see you at the conference.

A Yes, yes.

Q Okay.