

# Mohave County Presiding Judge Bartlett prepares for the future with families first

LAKE HAVASU CITY – Mohave County Presiding Judge Randolph A. Bartlett wants the court system to improve service to families.

“During the 15 year period from 1990 until 2005,” Bartlett said during an interview Thursday, Sept. 7, “our case filings have more than doubled in juvenile with domestic relations and civil filings surprisingly outpacing criminal filings.”

The incredible population increase and growth in Mohave County has obviously placed many stresses on all services provided by cities, counties and the state. Bartlett described the Mohave County Court system’s comprehensive plan to face the problems and prepare for the future.

“Part of our current vision is to create a unified family court,” he said. “This is a comprehensive approach to address the issues of families and children. Under the overall umbrella of a family court will be juvenile delinquency, dependency – where children have been victimized or any situation where child protective services have intervened – and domestic relations. This unified family court concept is to provide a multitude of services to children and families which can help end destructive behavior.

“One of the depressing issues caused by the demands of our present caseloads is that we are not able to address families’ needs in a timely fashion as we should,” Bartlett said, “especially when it comes to children’s issues. What we are finding out is, because of the delay from the time when a family issue comes up in court to the



Presiding Judge Randolph Bartlett

time that it is actually addressed, the people who are involved are adding to the filings in the criminal side of the system. A significant component of these situations is chemical abuse, whether it is drugs or alcohol.

“Through the family court concept, we can address these issues with the family as a whole to stop drug and alcohol dependency, not just with juveniles but with all members of each family,” he said. “By providing families with better services, we can help keep these people out of the judicial system, especially the juveniles, in future years. This concept puts our money and resources on the front end of the system as an investment in improving people’s values, ethics, education and mental and physical health which will keep them out of the system later on, thus saving

incalculable costs to the county in the long run.”

During the last 15 years, rural Mohave County has experienced a large influx of new residents coming from metropolitan areas.

“Many people are coming here for a variety of reasons,” he said. “Some come here after selling a home in the city and they purchase a nice home at a much lower cost. This is one benefit of moving to Mohave County. But not everyone succeeds once they get here. Some invest in businesses and, through lack of experience, come on hard times. This can lead to family stresses and, for some, divorce. We have a pretty high divorce rate here and that is one aspect that ends up in family court. Our conciliation, mediation, parent education and dispute resolution programs will be an integral part of this system.”

The drug problem, especially methamphetamine, is being targeted by federal, state, county and city governments. All law enforcement and court systems have been severely impacted by those who are involved in the drug culture.

“As a part of the family court concept, I am advocating the creation of a juvenile drug court,” Bartlett said. “Drug court provides another comprehensive approach to breaking people’s dependency on chemicals. This concept organizes all of the communities’ law enforcement, behavioral sciences and medical treatment for juveniles and adult family members. By encompassing treatment and these services in the civil system, we can deal with these problems earlier rather than later on in the criminal court system.

“Drugs are a tremendous problem for all of us,” he said. “In the first quarter of the year, in one small specific area, we had 10 new births. Of those 10, nine of those children were born methamphetamine addicts. If you look at law enforcement records, we are a channel, a natural corridor for drug distribution. Back in the 1970s, we were a channel for marijuana because we had the wide open spaces in the desert where someone could land a plane, dump their load and take off quickly. Today, that is no longer the problem. But because of our demographics and local access to the interstate, we are a natural corridor of some very bad chemicals. This increases our criminal caseloads and severity of charges. Currently, we have 21 individuals in custody on homicide charges. That’s a tremendous number for a county of our size.”

Recently, Judge Richard Weiss gave a presentation before the Board of Supervisors on a pretrial services program which would allow suspects under low-level, non-violent charges to be released on electronic monitoring.

“Soon, Judge Weiss will offer more information on that proposal to the Board,” Bartlett said. “We do need to be able to lessen the jail population. This pre-trial release program will do more than just cut down our expenses. Pre-trial services are designed to do several things. They are designed to get people back into society instead of keeping them as nothing but a burden to everyone else. This system will get them back into the workplace, assuming they have a job, while monitoring their activities on a weekly basis as well as electronically. If someone is taken in on a drug charge and they have a home and a job in the community, we can get them out and into treatment immediately while monitoring them to ensure public safety and protect our communities. As long as they are functioning correctly, there is no reason why we should be bearing the cost of incarcerating them. Of course, if they get into trouble or have a positive drug test, they will immediately be incarcerated. This will save the county a tremendous amount of

money and, once again, we can help families by getting people the treatment and counseling they need quickly while allowing them to continue productive employment.”

The courts have a variety of funding sources, Bartlett said. “There are certain moneys that are generated through probation fees, criminal penalties and sanctions that are imposed statutorily on individuals who commit offenses. They are called surcharges. Surcharges are based on each criminal’s activities once they are being processed through the courts. Because of the nature of the funding source, criminal surcharges have to be applied to the criminal court process. They can be used to improve the case management system, thus making sure these cases are progressing through the courts with the proper time frame. We are on a definite time limit – justice delayed is justice denied. The courts have to partner with prosecutors and defenders to make sure cases proceed correctly and timely.

“One of our funding sources, fill-the-gap funds, is being applied to staffing a commissioner with a criminal case assignment,” Bartlett said. “We are seeking a commissioner position, two court clerks and a court reporter. The commissioner position is a judicial officer, not a judge, the difference being, a commissioner doesn’t have all of the authority and powers of a judge and the salary is lower. But that position can do a lot to cut down the congestion in caseload and get people into the system quicker thus improving caseloads. Eventually, the commissioner position will evolve and come under the umbrella of the unified family court.

“We are working toward being able to apply for more grants,” he said. “Next year, \$1 million in grant funds will be available for drug courts. That is why I would like to get the structure to support a juvenile drug court up and running so we can go after those funds.

“Population growth statistics show us that we will also probably qualify for another constitutional Superior Court division in 2007. A constitutional Superior Court division can handle all matters, civil and criminal, and is a general jurisdiction state trial court,” he said. “We are already bursting at the seams in our historic old courthouse in Kingman. I don’t want to spend too much money remodeling that old building. Sometimes we have as many as three jury trials going simultaneously and that can lead to a jury pool of 300 people. We’re having a hard time finding room for today’s realities. I just hope that we are able to build the proposed Law and Justice Center.”

Bartlett earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration at the University of Arizona in 1971 and received his Juris Doctorate from the University of Arizona College of Law in 1975. He has been a public defender and prosecutor for Mohave County and is a former chief criminal deputy and former chief deputy Mohave County attorney. From 1980 until 1998, Bartlett was in private practice in Lake Havasu City and, in 1998, he was appointed by Arizona Gov. Jane Hull to the Superior Court, Div. II, bench. Bartlett was appointed presiding judge in February of 2005.

“I also understand that we need to be held accountable,” he said. “I’m not an advocate of overspending. And, although I have sometimes disagreed with the county administration on some priorities and funding, I respect them for making sure every single penny is spent wisely. The public has a misconception about the county administration and the county’s function. They have short memories. Not too many years ago, this county was in horrible financial condition. Some people who criticize the county now have forgotten what the county’s situation was before our current Board took office.

Our administration has a very conservative responsible approach to fiscal management and they have achieved significant strides in a fairly short period of time.”

The presiding judge would like to see more understanding of county services from state leaders.

“The reality is, no other level of governmental can supply the services that we, the courts and the county as a whole, do for our residents,” he said. “Without state funds, our services won’t be there. I think the way we are looked at by some at a state level today is the result of philosophical beliefs. I would like to see our legislative representatives come to the county and learn about all the necessary services that we supply – that we are mandated to supply.

“We don’t just serve people of one philosophy,” he said. “We serve the people, everyone.

“I think Mohave County’s executive, legislative and judicial branches are recognizing each other and working together very well and it think that will continue,” Bartlett said, “and I’m very happy about that.”