

# Swift Justice



Michelle Kim /The News

**Standing firm:** (Left to right) Rockdale Superior Court Judge David Irwin, State Court Judge Nancy Bills, and consultant Derek Marchman are among the organizers, along with Rockdale County and the District Attorney's Office, spearheading the application for a grant that will help form a Family Violence Court.

## Grant aids formation of Family Violence Court

By Jessica Smith

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Rockdale County State Court Judge Nancy Bills intends on imparting swift justice and better outcomes for domestic violence victims using a new grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Justice for development of a Family Violence Court.

The \$337,920 grant, budgeted over three years, was issued by the Office on Violence Against Women and approved

by the Rockdale County Board of Commissioners on Nov. 13.

"It becomes much easier for the victim to receive a more holistic treatment and harder for the accused to manipulate the system," with the Family Violence Court, Bills said.

A key component of her plan is streamlining the judicial process and eliminating red tape. A victim's case may not be heard

The News

Saturday, Nov. 17, 2012 • 3

## GRANT

From front page

until anywhere between four and fourteen months after the perpetrator is arrested. This is often due to the accused having multiple charges in different courts, (i.e. state and superior courts). Judge Bills, along with Superior Court Judge David Irwin and Judge-elect Robert Mumford, is looking to take "a one family, one judge approach." It would avoid duplication — for example, Judge Irwin hearing the civil case, then Judge Bills re-hearing it as part of the domestic issue. "It's wasting everyone's time and resources," Bills said.

Her vision is to have all judges cross-sworn with jurisdiction over the temporary restraining orders. "We're breaking down barriers to have a more synergistic approach," she said. With a dedicated family violence docket and prosecutors, the system can be more effective.

Bills credits Judge Irwin's input during the grant interview process in helping Rockdale County secure it. She also cites the working relationships and trust built over the years between the judges and District Attorney Richard Read. Though Bills isn't yet certain how it will eventually look — she is due to attend federal training in January — she's confident they will have a committed team for the family violence court. "We have a small circuit: one county, one District Attorney and all the judges are on board," she said. "We have all the ingredients to make it successful."

A more timely process also ensures the victim's confidence in the

system. Recently appointed Family Violence Court coordinator Derek Marchman said. "We're trying to eliminate any reason why a victim wouldn't be an active participant and trust and use the courts and remove barriers that keeps us from holding him accountable."

Examining bond compliance is another advantage the federal grant offers by providing for surveillance officers to check on victims. Marchman said it adds another layer of protection serving as a deterrent and elevating the victim's sense of security and self-esteem. Bills plans to contract off-duty sheriff's deputies, who also have arrest powers, to report to the court. "We've never had the resources for that — we only know if a bond has been violated if they commit a new offense," she said. "We want to be monitoring compliance all along."

"Domestic violence is one of the simplest crimes... two people who live together get in a fight, but it's also the most complex crime to sift through the external variables," said Marchman, "In these cases, you truly have to look at everything going on."

Last year alone, more than 400 domestic violence cases passed through Rockdale County courts. Among the most notable were incidents resulting in the deaths of children. "That goes to show we need a different approach...for hard-core offenders, what we're doing for everyone else is not going to help their victims or change them," said Bills. "Domestic violence courts aren't new. They're like other problem-solving courts because they are more economical, and they're trying to address what's really going on with the family and victim."

See Grant Page 3