

## Chief justice: Mesa County national model

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By [Charles Ashby](#)

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DENVER — Mesa County criminal justice workers got a big shout-out from the state's top judge on Friday.

In his State-of-the-Judiciary address to a joint session of the Colorado Legislature, Colorado Supreme Court Chief Justice Michael Bender highlighted a collaborative initiative in Mesa County that's unlike the rest of the nation.

That initiative, known as Evidence-Based Decision Making, is designed to bring about the best resolution in criminal sentencing at the least cost in time, hardship and expense to all in the judicial system, from the courts to corrections.

"Mesa County is now a recognized national model for a plan to reduce criminal recidivism by applying evidence-based decision making practices," Bender told all 100 lawmakers in the state Capitol. "These practices rely on actual data to determine such things as which defendants pose the greatest risks, what circumstances drive that risk, what outcomes or sentences will have the best impact, and what programs best serve public safety."

The program began in 2010 through a grant from the National Institute of Corrections. Its goal was to build a more collaborative effort to handle defendants from arrest through incarceration, with the intent of reducing the odds of them re-offending after their eventual release.

Bender said the idea is unique because it ties everyone together, including groups that traditionally work against one another, from police to public attorneys to parole officers.

"Although these groups represent divergent interests within an adversarial (court) system, they have found a way to collaborate by focusing on a common value, the need for public safety," Bender said. "They have trained personnel and have set up a pilot criminal courtroom where evidence-based decision making practices are applied in each stage of the criminal process."

In his speech, Bender also called for lawmakers to approve Gov. John Hickenlooper's plan to increase pay for all state workers, including the 3,500 workers in the state's court system.

He said that like all state workers, court employees have not had a pay raise in four years.

Bender, who's served on the high court since 1997, also said he will step down from the bench next year when he turns 72. "Today is the last time I will have the opportunity to address you," Bender said in closing. "Our Constitution mandates that I step down as a justice in about a year, when I turn 72 and am sent out to pasture. It has been a great honor to serve on the court."