



SUCCESS STORY

Building a Team

USAID Helps Bring Law Enforcement Officials Together to Fight Crime



Photo Credit: USAID Justice and Security Program

Teamwork allows the police to create a safer environment for the people.

"Since implementing the protocols developed with USAID, police and prosecutors have gotten to know each other, trust each other, and stand shoulder to shoulder. That has given the police much more confidence and motivation to take the initiative."

— Rosa Mendoza, Sexual Crimes Police Coordinator

Mexicali police and prosecutors felt they had reason to be proud when they brought Pedro Ramos before a judge on suspicion of armed robbery and rape. They knew they had pulled off a meticulous operation with exceptional speed and efficiency. "This arrest was possible because of very tight collaboration between municipal police, investigative police, and prosecutors," said María Coronado, a prosecutor at the Sexual Crimes Unit in Mexicali. "It was made possible by changes in the system." The prior procedural system included many bureaucratic steps, which made compiling evidence and finding a suspect cumbersome.

The improvements to Mexicali's law enforcement are due to Mexico's landmark justice reform, which increases the responsibilities of the police and empowers them to not only prevent crime, but to investigate and assist prosecutors in building cases. USAID has played a critical role in helping to implement these reforms. Specifically, USAID helped develop protocols that delegate tasks and facilitate communication between police and prosecutors. Since the protocols went into effect last September in Mexicali's Sexual Crimes Unit, police participation in investigations has doubled, and the number of investigations completed successfully has increased more than 140%. "Better coordination between police and prosecutors has made a huge difference," said Rosa Mendoza, the police coordinator at the Sexual Crimes Unit. "Because of the protocols developed with USAID, we are now able to minimize the time we spend apprehending a suspect."

One of the most important aspects of the new protocol defines the role of the police after a crime. Municipal police, who previously did little more than cordon off the crime scene, now immediately start identifying evidence, gathering names and interviewing witnesses, and ensuring the safety of public officials and civilians in the case of a bomb threat or other danger. Investigative police, who once had to wait for orders from prosecutors, now act immediately when they arrive onsite. They thoroughly interview witnesses, analyze evidence, and call in experts in ballistics, fingerprinting and chemical forensics.

Police say that the speed of the new system allows them to collect evidence that might otherwise have disappeared under the old system. Meanwhile, police and prosecutors, who rarely worked side by side in the past, are now encouraged to meet every day. They are in constant contact as investigations unfold. "There are only a few steps between the offices of the police and prosecutors here at the Sexual Crimes Unit. But that distance was once an

abyss," said Mendoza. "Now we work together, apprehend suspects more quickly, and obtain evidence that stands up in court."

That is what happened last November in the Ramos case. Police received a call on the emergency hotline informing them that a well-known ice cream shop had been held up and its hostess raped at knife-point. As prosecutors debriefed the traumatized woman back at headquarters and helped her through medical exams and psychological counseling, police were at the scene interviewing witnesses and performing forensic analysis on the weapon and the DNA in the bathroom where the rape occurred.

As soon as prosecutors obtained the assailant's description, they called the police who used that information to comb records of arrests of suspects matching the description. By 6:30 that evening, the team had arrested Ramos- a vagrant dressed in old, filthy clothes who had been arrested previously on charges of public harassment, assault, and possession of a deadly weapon. The suspect, currently in jail, awaits trial and faces a sentence of up to nine years in prison.

Under the old system, Ramos might easily have fled the city before he could be apprehended. Delays in collecting and securing physical samples on site might also have comprised the case, allowing evidence to disappear or decay.