

Get to Know Hon. Suzanne Ramos Bolanos (Ret.)



Over the course of a trailblazing legal career, **Hon. Suzanne Ramos Bolanos (Ret.)** has earned a reputation as a thoughtful, strategic, and deeply compassionate neutral. With over 20 years on the San Francisco Superior Court bench and a diverse background in government, civil rights, and high-stakes litigation, Judge Bolanos now devotes her practice at ADR Services, Inc. to helping parties resolve disputes efficiently and fairly—particularly in complex civil, employment, and medical malpractice cases. We sat down with her to talk about her approach to mediation, her most meaningful professional milestones, and what continues to drive her work in dispute resolution.

Q: You spent more than two decades on the bench. What kinds of civil matters did you handle as a judge?

Ramos Bolanos: I presided over civil trials for more than 15 years, including complex commercial cases, employment matters, medical malpractice, and jury trials. I was also assigned to law and motion and conducted hundreds of settlement conferences. I was honored to be selected for the court's civil settlement team, where I helped resolve many contentious and high-stakes cases. Prior to my appointment, I litigated civil matters as an Assistant U.S. Attorney, defending the federal government in tort and employment disputes.

Q: What would you consider your core strengths and areas of expertise?

Ramos Bolanos: Employment law is a key area for me, particularly workplace discrimination and sexual harassment. I'm also deeply experienced with medical malpractice, torts, and complex civil matters. As a neutral, I think my core strengths include my ability to connect with people, to listen with empathy, and to communicate clearly—especially when it comes to explaining risk and assessing a party's position realistically. As a fluent Spanish speaker, I am also able to bridge both linguistic and cultural barriers with Latinx clients, and communicate cross-culturally with people of all different backgrounds.

Q: What are some of the professional accomplishments you're most proud of?

Ramos Bolanos: Being appointed to the bench by Governor Gray Davis—and becoming the first Latina judge on the San Francisco Superior Court—was a defining moment. I'm also proud to have presided over significant cases, including the first jury trial against Monsanto involving Roundup and claims of cancer causation.

Beyond the courtroom, I'm proud of founding the Elimination of Bias Committee at our court and chairing it for the past several years. I also co-chaired the Color of Justice program for over a

Areas of Expertise:

- Commercial Contract/General Business
- Disaster Relief
- Employment
- Medical Malpractice
- Personal Injury
- Products Liability

decade, which connects underserved youth with the legal system. In recognition of my work, I was selected as Judge of the Year by the Barrister's Club of the Bar Association of San Francisco in 2025. I have also received numerous awards from other community-based bar associations.

Q: You've had such a multifaceted career—including roles in public policy and civil rights. What brought you to dispute resolution?

Ramos Bolanos: It started with my work as a settlement judge. I found I could often do more for litigants by helping them reach a resolution than by presiding over a trial. There's something incredibly satisfying about seeing people find closure—not after three weeks in trial, but in one day. That realization led me to pursue this full-time after retiring from the bench.

Q: What's your strategy when parties reach an impasse during mediation?

Ramos Bolanos: One strategy I use is to try to help them visualize what trial actually looks like: testifying in open court, facing cross-examination, and convincing twelve strangers to agree with them. That process is unpredictable, stressful, and expensive. I remind parties that even if a settlement isn't exactly what they hoped for, it can still be a better outcome than gambling on a verdict.

Q: Do you have a specific mediation philosophy?

Ramos Bolanos: I do—and it's pretty simple. *Never give up.* To borrow from Winston Churchill: "Never, never, never give up." Persistence is key. Some cases settle quickly, others take time, and some require a lot of follow-up. But if the parties are willing to keep talking, I'll keep working.

Q: How do you prepare for mediation?

Ramos Bolanos: I take preparation very seriously. I review briefs, prior rulings, deposition transcripts, and key evidence. I also meet with counsel ahead of time, often by Zoom, to get a better sense of the parties, their goals, and the emotional undercurrents in the case. It's not just about the legal issues—it's about the people behind the claims.

Q: And what about post-mediation follow-up?

Ramos Bolanos: If a case doesn't settle during the session, I often make a mediator's proposal. I also follow up after key developments, like summary judgment rulings. A motion can change the landscape dramatically, and sometimes all it takes is a new perspective to reopen negotiations. I follow through all the way to trial call—and sometimes beyond.

Q: How would attorneys describe your style?

Ramos Bolanos: I hope they'd say I'm patient, fair, and effective. I try to be pleasant to work with, but also honest and realistic. And yes—I like to think I'm smart about how I approach the law and the human side of every case.

From the Bench to the Settlement Table.

Judge Suzanne Ramos Bolanos brings not just deep legal expertise but a public servant's heart to her work as a mediator and arbitrator. Fluent in Spanish, grounded in empathy, and steadfast in her pursuit of fairness, she continues to guide parties toward resolution with grace, clarity, and resolve.

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