



Supreme Court of Florida

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Chief Justice R. Fred Lewis announces appointment of Special Advisor on Criminal Justice and Mental Health

TALLAHASSEE – Countless news stories have reported the plight of the mentally ill caught up in Florida's legal system. The questions they raise remain unanswered today.

Are the mentally ill merely being housed in jails rather than receiving the treatment they need? What alternatives might work better? What can Florida's courts do to improve the situation?

Chief Justice R. Fred Lewis Wednesday announced an initiative that will focus on those questions. He was joined by Lieutenant Governor Jeff Kottkamp, Department of Children and Families Secretary Bob Butterworth and Department of Juvenile Justice Secretary Walter McNeil.

Chief Justice Lewis appointed the Hon. Steve Leifman, an associate administrative judge from Miami, to serve as Special Advisor to the Chief Justice on Criminal Justice and Mental Health. Judge Leifman will serve for a term ending June 30, 2007, and will report directly to the Chief Justice. The funding to support the initiative is provided from a grant from The Florida Bar Foundation. The order of appointment is at:

<http://www.floridasupremecourt.org/clerk/adminorders/2007/sc07-11.pdf>

Statistics show the scope and urgency of the problem of untreated mental illness: Annually somewhere between 7 percent and 8 percent of all arrests in the United States involved people with acute mental illnesses requiring immediate treatment. Approximately 75 percent of those people also have substance use disorders.

In Florida, an estimated 70,000 people with serious mental illnesses requiring immediate treatment are arrested and booked into jail. The administrative order signed by Chief Justice Lewis notes that it is “a concern that state and county correctional facilities may essentially become the largest psychiatric institutions in Florida, at enormous expense to taxpayers.”

The Special Advisor on Criminal Justice and Mental Health has been appointed in an effort to reduce the number of mentally ill people in the criminal justice system and to enhance the administration of justice and the responsiveness of the public mental health system.

Judge Leifman will be called on to identify and recommend practices that have proven effective in improving the response of both the public mental health system and the criminal justice system to people with mental illness.

He will provide recommendations to the Chief Justice on reforms in the justice system that will provide “tangible, identifiable, long-term solutions” to the problems associated with untreated mental illness. Working with executive departments such as Children and Families, Corrections, Juvenile Justice, the Agency for Health Care Administration and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, Judge Leifman additionally will provide the Chief Justice with recommendations to be passed on to those partners.

The work will be done in a spirit of cooperation and collaboration with the executive and legislative branches of government.

"I applaud our state agencies and our representatives of the Legislature and the Justice system for their willingness to make tangible improvements for the sake of Floridians with mental illness." said Lt. Governor Kottkamp. "This collaboration is a shining example of the positive effect that partnerships and cooperation within our government can create for the benefit of all Floridians."

DCF Secretary Bob Butterworth also praised the initiative.

"This initiative allows us to examine our mental health system from all points of view," he said. "It is important that everyone involved, social services, law enforcement, and the judicial and legislative branches understand each other and what we're each striving to achieve for these individuals with mental illness. Together we have the opportunity to make extensive improvements to our mental health system."

The administrative order signed by the Chief Justice also emphasizes the need for “joint problem-solving.”

“The judiciary is uniquely positioned to stimulate, support, and sustain joint problem-solving initiatives designed to improve outcomes for people with mental illnesses in the justice system and bring reasoned, evidence-based approaches to alleviating problems associated with and contributing to untreated mental illnesses within the criminal justice system and our communities,” the order reads.