



Supreme Court of Florida

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE 11/12/2007

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TALLAHASSEE -- Following up on an organizational meeting held in April, state leaders including Chief Justice R. Fred Lewis and Gov. Charlie Crist will convene at 1:00 p.m. November 14 at the Florida Supreme Court to unveil and discuss an extensive new report by a committee studying how Florida's court and social support systems deal with the mentally ill. Read the Full Report.

The problems addressed in the nearly 200 page report are complex. For example, incarceration of the mentally ill is so widespread that many jails have become the largest mental health care providers in their communities. And state agencies have had limited success implementing laws designed to move the mentally ill out of jails to more appropriate and often less expensive treatment facilities.

"None of the substance of this report," said Lewis, "can be implemented by any single branch of state government. We need all three branches involved, and I am so proud to see how well the leadership has responded."

The report follows media accounts over the last few years detailing the plight of the mentally ill caught up in Florida's legal system. The mentally ill often end up homeless on the streets, develop substance abuse problems, and end up in jail repeatedly for relatively minor offenses directly related to their illnesses or addictions.

Without appropriate treatment, their problems only grow worse.

"I think we all recognize," said Lewis, "that Florida now is stuck in a vicious cycle of inappropriate behavior leading to inappropriate incarceration, again and again. At root, this is an issue about using the wrong tools and the more expensive tools to address human problems and human suffering arising from a treatable disease."

Florida's response to the problem has been implemented in part using grant funding awarded last spring by the Council of State Governments Justice Center in New York. Florida was one of only seven states chosen by the Justice Center, which was created in part to address the national crisis in the way states handle mentally ill inmates.

Ohio Supreme Court Justice Evelyn Stratton, co-chair of the advisory board that reviewed all grant applications, praised Florida's steps toward finding new solutions.

"The application process was very competitive," she said. "The states selected had to demonstrate that they had engaged legislative and executive branch leaders, and that their task force had the potential to yield a viable, comprehensive plan.

"Florida clearly demonstrated the broad base of leadership necessary to make the plan successful, and we look forward to working with the state in the upcoming years."

For prior Court documents on this subject, see:

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

<http://www.floridasupremecourt.org/clerk/adminorders/2007/sc07-30.pdf>

http://www.floridasupremecourt.org/pub_info/releases.shtml

Note: This event will be broadcast live on The Florida Channel via its satellite uplink, which feeds to cable systems throughout Florida, and will be available in a webcast at <http://wfsu.org/gavel2gavel/>. For more information on the broadcast and satellite downlink, call Rick Potrikus at WFSU-TV at 850-487-3170.

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