



Supreme Court of Florida

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Chief Justice Labarga Presents Award for Excellence to Miami Judge

ORLANDO – Disturbed by the procession of persons with mental illnesses cycling through his courtroom, Miami-Dade County Judge Steve Leifman decided to find better ways to handle people with mental illnesses and began a search that has changed lives and saved lives. His commitment and compassion are a source of inspiration for all who work in the courts, Florida Chief Justice Jorge Labarga said Wednesday as he presented Judge Leifman with the newly established Chief Justice Award for Judicial Excellence.

Acting on behalf of the Supreme Court, the chief justice presented the award at the annual education program for Florida's 322 county judges. A second award will be presented to a circuit judge next month at the annual education program for circuit judges. A selection committee of two county judges and two circuit judges, appointed by their respective judicial conferences, selected both award recipients from nominations made by judges.

The Eleventh Judicial Circuit Criminal Mental Health Project, which Judge Leifman created in 2000 and continues to chair today, is just one example of the impact of Judge Leifman's efforts, Chief Justice Labarga said.

Recognized nationally for its innovations and effectiveness, this program diverts people with serious mental illnesses who do not pose significant public safety risks into community-based treatment and support programs. The recidivism rate for people who successfully complete the program after being charged with a felony is just 6 percent. Since its creation, some 4,000 people with mental illnesses have been diverted from the Miami-Dade County Jail.

Judge Leifman has also been involved in developing the nation's largest Crisis Intervention Team training program. More than 4,400 law enforcement officers in Miami-Dade County have been trained to recognize the signs and symptoms of mental illnesses and to respond more effectively and appropriately to people in psychiatric crisis. In the last four years, officers with Miami-Dade County and the city of Miami who have been trained in the C.I.T. program have responded to approximately 35,000 calls. Nearly 8,000 people were diverted into community treatment rather than being arrested. Just 85 arrests were made.

The savings here are estimated to be \$12 million annually.

Miami-Dade County Judge Robin Faber, a colleague of Judge Leifman's, described his leadership style as "a deeply pragmatic, collaborative and focused approach to working across systems and organizations to find long-term, sustainable solutions to a shared community, state and national problem."

She pointed to his "relentless efforts and enthusiasm to improve the quality of life for members of the community, many of whom are among our most vulnerable and marginalized citizens, as well as enhancing the administration of justice."

His leadership and experience made Judge Leifman a natural choice in 2007 for appointment by former Florida Chief Justice R. Fred Lewis to chair a statewide task force comprised of leaders from all three branches of government as well as state and national experts. The report issued by the Supreme Court's Mental Health Subcommittee "is widely regarded as one of the most promising and viable state plans to date aimed at effectively diverting people with mental illnesses away from the justice system and into community-based treatment and services," Judge Faber said.

Judge Leifman was appointed a county judge in Miami-Dade's civil division in July 1995. Since 1998, he has been a judge in the county's criminal division. Before becoming a judge, he worked in private practice and in the public defender's office. He graduated from Florida State University College of Law in 1986.

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