



NEWS RELEASE

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Miami Judge Steve Leifman wins William H. Rehnquist Award

(Williamsburg, VA) August 12, 2015 –Steven Leifman, Associate Administrative Judge of the Miami-Dade County Court - Criminal Division in Florida, has been named the National Center for State Courts’ recipient of the William H. Rehnquist Award for Judicial Excellence. Judge Leifman is being recognized for his groundbreaking work helping people with mental illnesses who are either in the criminal justice system or at-risk of incarceration. One of the nation’s highest judicial honors, the Rehnquist Award is presented annually to a state court judge who exemplifies judicial excellence, integrity, fairness, and professional ethics. Chief Justice of the United States John G. Roberts Jr. will present the award to Judge Leifman during a ceremony at the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, D.C. on November 19. This is the 20th anniversary of the Rehnquist Award, and Judge Leifman is the first Florida judge to receive the honor.

“Judge Leifman has built a national reputation for his pragmatic, collaborative, and focused approach to finding long-term solutions that improve people’s lives and the health of the community and the courts,” NCSC President Mary McQueen said. “Judge Leifman recognized and identified problems within the justice system, and he was relentless in his efforts to change things. His work demonstrates the difference that judicial excellence, and action, can make in improving the administration of justice.”

Judge Leifman’s work has done much to transform the way people in the criminal justice system with mental illnesses are treated. Several years ago, Judge Leifman realized that many of the same people who came before his court were reappearing repeatedly and frequently. These defendants were charged with minor offenses, such as loitering, and they exhibited signs of being distraught and disheveled. This revolving door from courthouse to jail to street and back was costly to taxpayers, placed large burdens on the correctional and judicial systems, and was devastating to defendants and their families.

Judge Leifman was determined to find a better way to handle these cases.

Florida Chief Justice Jorge Labarga said Judge Leifman epitomizes judicial excellence: "Troubled by people with mental illnesses cycling through his Miami courtroom, Judge Leifman decided to take action. His unwavering commitment and compassion in the years since that moment have brought astounding results, changing and saving lives, bringing families back together. He has made our courts more just and our society more humane."

Judge Leifman in 2000 created the Eleventh Judicial Circuit Criminal Mental Health Project, which diverts individuals with serious mental illnesses who do not pose a risk to the public away from criminal justice system and into community-based treatment and support services. This has resulted in fewer arrests and incarcerations of people with mental illness, reduced crime, reduced injuries to law enforcement officers, improved public safety, reduced cost to taxpayers, and improved the administration of justice.

Since this project's inception, Judge Leifman also has developed the nation's largest Crisis Intervention Team training program that teaches law enforcement offices to recognize signs of mental illness and to respond more effectively to individuals in psychiatric crisis. Judge Leifman also has served as an advisor to the Florida Supreme Court, resulting in the development of specialized training programs for judges to help them better handle cases involving people with mental illnesses.

Judge Leifman chairs, co-chairs and is a member of numerous organizations, associations, boards, and committees dedicated to mental health and legal issues. He has authored several publications and articles on this topic and has been featured in national and state television and radio programs regarding mental health and the criminal justice system, including: CBS News; NBC Nightly News; NPR's All Things Considered; CNN Anderson Cooper Special Report; and PBS' Minds on the Edge: Facing Mental Illness.

The National Center for State Courts, headquartered in Williamsburg, Va., is a nonprofit court organization dedicated to improving the administration of justice by providing leadership and service to the state courts. Founded in 1971 by the Conference of Chief Justices and Chief Justice of the United States Warren E. Burger, NCSC provides education, training, technology, management, and research services to the nation's state courts.

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