First Florida Judge Receives William Rehnquist Award

TALLAHASSEE – For the first time, a Florida judge has been awarded one of the nation’s highest judicial honors. Miami-Dade County Judge Steven Leifman accepted the William H. Rehnquist Award for Judicial Excellence from U.S. Chief Justice John Roberts at a dinner Thursday at the U.S. Supreme Court.

Judge Leifman has been unwavering in his efforts to keep people with mental illnesses out of the courts and jail cells -- in his local community, throughout Florida and around the country, Florida Chief Justice Jorge Labarga said when he introduced Judge Leifman at Thursday’s event.

“Judge Leifman’s commitment and compassion are truly a source of inspiration for all who work in our courts,” Chief Justice Labarga said.

The National Center for State Courts annually chooses a state judge to receive the William H. Rehnquist Award for Judicial Excellence. William Rehnquist joined the U.S. Supreme Court in 1972 and became chief justice in 1986. He died in 2005. The award named in his honor, now in its 20th year, recognizes judges who exemplify judicial excellence, integrity, fairness, and professional ethics.

When NCSC announced its selection of Judge Leifman as the 2015 recipient, NCSC President Mary McQueen said his work “demonstrates the difference that judicial excellence, and action, can make in improving the administration of justice.”

Judge Leifman graduated from Florida State University College of Law in 1986 and worked in private practice and the public defender’s office before being appointed a county judge in Miami-Dade’s civil division 20 years ago. Since 1998, he has been a judge in the county’s criminal division.
In 2000, Judge Leifman created the 11th Judicial Circuit Criminal Mental Health Project, which he continues to chair today. 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.

“These kinds of statistics are so impressive,” Chief Justice Labarga said. “But it’s not just a matter of compassionate and humane treatment of those among us with mental illnesses. These results also translate into dollars and cents. When a county sees its average daily jail population drop 40 percent -- from 7,200 people to 4,200 people – that means taxpayers are getting a break.”

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

In 2007, former Florida Chief Justice R. Fred Lewis appointed Judge Leifman his special advisor on criminal justice and mental health and Judge Leifman oversaw development of the groundbreaking report “Transforming Florida’s Mental Health System.” That initiative drew together 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 respected as one of the best state plans of its kind.

Judge Leifman now chairs the Florida Supreme Court’s Task Force on Substance Abuse and Mental Health Issues, continuing to provide exemplary statewide leadership.

Earlier this year, Judge Leifman was one of two Florida trial judges to receive the state’s inaugural Chief Justice Award for Judicial Excellence. Like the national award, the state award honored Judge Leifman’s efforts to find, promote and implement ways to keep people with mental illness out of jail and in treatment programs.

###