TALLAHASSEE – The Miami-Dade County Jail has become one of Florida’s largest mental health treatment facilities. State agencies have been unable to comply with laws requiring that mentally ill inmates be transferred from jails for treatment. The Department of Children & Families reports that up to 23 percent of Florida county jail inmates experience serious mental illness.

In response, Florida Chief Justice R. Fred Lewis will hold a Criminal Justice Mental Health Summit this fall using grant funding awarded this month by the Council of State Governments Justice Center in New York. The Summit will bring together key leaders in all branches of government to begin finding solutions, and will include Lewis taking part in a national summit starting April 30.

“The increasing numbers of people with mental illness appearing in criminal courts, and the frequency with which these people cycle through our prisons and jails have become a crisis for Florida,” Lewis said. “Florida’s selection in this national initiative is a very important and positive development.”

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. The national initiative has three components:
• The seven participating states will meet at a national summit April 30 and May 1 in Atlanta at the Westin Peachtree Plaza and the Carter Center to discuss policy approaches to the problem. Lewis will attend.

• Florida will receive up to $12,000 in grant funding to pay expenses for the statewide summit to be held later this fall. Details of that summit will be released later.

• Florida will receive continuing technical support from the Justice Center in the years ahead, along with direct access to national experts in mental health issues.

Florida was accepted into the Justice Center program based on an application Lewis submitted that noted he already had begun to create broad-based programs to address the issue. A November 1, 2006, order issued by Lewis created a Mental Health Subcommittee within the Steering Committee on Families & Children in the Court—a group headed by Miami-Dade Judge Steven Leifman.

Later, on April 4, Lewis named Leifman as Florida’s first Special Advisor to the Chief Justice on Criminal Justice and Mental Health. Lewis jointly made this announcement with representatives and leaders of state agencies that included Lieutenant Gov. Jeff Kottkamp, the Secretaries of the Department of Children & Families and the Department of Juvenile Justice, and top officials from the Department of Corrections. Discussions also are ongoing with legislative leadership.

Ohio Supreme Court Justice Evelyn Stratton, co-chair of the advisory board that reviewed all grant applications, praised Florida’s first 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 they 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.”

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