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Immediate Release

Delaware Selected to Participate in National Criminal Justice/Mental Health Initiative

The Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center has announced that the Delaware Courts have been selected to participate in the Chief Justices' Criminal Justice/Mental Health Leadership Initiative. The initiative is a national project in its second year designed to assist state supreme court chief justices, together with state leaders, in developing strategic plans to improve responses to people with mental illnesses involved in the justice system.

Chief Justices from 13 states submitted applications, with only four states being selected to participate in the initiative; Delaware will be joined by Wisconsin, Idaho, and New Hampshire. Chief Justice Myron T. Steele has designated Delaware Supreme Court Justice Henry duPont Ridgely as the chair of this project, due to his extensive experience with criminal justice and mental health issues. Over the next year, Justice Ridgely will convene a statewide task force to examine ways to improve outcomes for people with mental illnesses engaged with the criminal justice system. The Delaware Supreme Court Task Force on Mental Health will receive funding and technical assistance from the [CSG Justice Center](#) and [National GAINS Center](#), two nonprofit organizations coordinating the initiative. The task force members will also participate in a CSG Justice Center–convened policy forum with their counterparts from the other three states.

“Chief Justice Steele and Justice Ridgely have demonstrated the Delaware Supreme Court’s commitment to addressing the needs of people with mental illnesses, and we are pleased to be able to invite Delaware to participate,” said Judge Steven Leifman, Special Advisor on Criminal Justice/Mental Health to the Florida Supreme Court and co-chair of the advisory board that reviewed the submissions. “The application process was very competitive, and we are confident that Delaware’s task force will design and implement successful strategies.”

“The frequency with which people with mental illnesses enter our courts, jails and prisons remains a critical problem. This task force will greatly enhance our understanding of the problems that individuals with mental illnesses face, enable us to identify specific gaps in resources, including improvements to treatment options, as well as steps to take, when appropriate, to help individuals with mental illnesses avoid contact with the criminal justice system.” said Justice Ridgely.

According to a 2006 report by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, nearly a quarter of both state prisoners and jail inmates who reported they had a mental health problem had served three or more prior incarcerations. This makes them familiar faces in our nation’s courtrooms. Justice Ridgely noted “Delaware has already initiated substantial efforts to divert those with mental illnesses from the criminal justice system, including the establishment of pilot mental health courts in New Castle County. Through the Delaware Supreme Court Task Force on Mental Health, we look forward to the opportunity to support and expand these initiatives, and to explore new ways to improve the treatment of the mentally ill within Delaware’s criminal justice system. The task force has the joint goals of improving the quality of life for those with mental illnesses in Delaware, increasing public safety, and ensuring that state funds directed towards mental health issues are being used most cost-effectively.”

“To address this complex issue, there must be extensive collaboration among a state’s systems. The Supreme Court is often uniquely positioned to convene key leaders to develop bipartisan, coordinated strategies,” said Presiding Judge of the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals and Justice Center board chair Sharon Keller. “I look forward to seeing what the Delaware Supreme Court’s task force will accomplish in the coming year.”

The support to the state task forces is made possible through grants from the JEHT Foundation and the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. Funding for the planning phases of this project was provided by the U.S. Justice Department’s Bureau of Justice Assistance and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The Council of State Governments Justice Center is a national nonprofit organization that serves policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels from all branches of government. The Justice Center provides practical, nonpartisan advice and consensus-driven strategies, informed by available evidence, to increase public safety and strengthen communities.

State Media Contact: Patricia Griffin, State Court Administrator at 302-856-5406, patricia.griffin@state.de.us

CSG Justice Center Contact: Lauren Almquist at 646-383-5743, lalmquist@csg.org