

IMMEDIATE RELEASE
April 27, 2007

Contacts: Martha Plotkin 240.482.8579
(on-site) Lauren Almquist 973.219.1856

Press interested in scheduling an interview with Chief Justices attending the Chief Justices' Criminal Justice / Mental Health Leadership Initiative Policy Forum, contact Lauren Lieberman at 301-379-6202.

CSG Justice Center Brings States' Chief Justices Together to Improve Criminal Justice Response to People with Mental Illnesses

ATLANTA, GA – The Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center, in partnership with the National GAINS/TAPA Center, has announced a new national project that supports chief justices who have established statewide task forces to improve the response to people with mental illnesses involved in the criminal justice system. The Chief Justices' Criminal Justice / Mental Health Leadership Initiative is the first project of its kind, and it kicks off with a two-day policy forum on Monday, April 30, in Atlanta.

“Improving outcomes for people with mental illnesses involved in the criminal justice system requires extensive collaboration among leaders in the judiciary, the legislature, and the administrators of multiple state agencies,” said Massachusetts Rep. Mike Festa, Chair of the CSG Justice Center Board of Directors. “We established this initiative because in many states, the supreme court’s chief justice is uniquely positioned to convene and lead a multi-branch discussion on this issue that results in meaningful action.”

Increasingly, people with mental illnesses are becoming familiar faces in our courtrooms and filling our prisons and jails. It is difficult to overstate the impact of this trend on people’s lives, public safety, the administration of the justice system, as well as taxpayers and state budgets. 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 having a mental health problem had served three or more prior sentences.

The CSG Justice Center solicited applications from chief justices from across the country interested in addressing complex criminal justice/mental health issues. Twenty-three states submitted applications for the initiative, of which seven were selected: Georgia, Texas, Florida, California, Missouri, Vermont, and Nevada. These states will receive technical assistance, access to leading national experts, modest funding support, and a place at this national forum.

Evelyn Stratton, Associate Justice of the Ohio State Supreme Court and co-chair of the advisory board that reviewed the applications said the process was very competitive. “The states selected had to demonstrate that they had engaged legislative and executive branch leaders, and that their task force had the potential to yield a viable, comprehensive plan,” she explained.

-MORE-

The chief justices and their task forces have a difficult road ahead of them. In Texas, for example, the Criminal Justice Department reports that 30 percent of the people incarcerated have previous contacts with the public mental health system. “The increasing numbers of people with mental illnesses who cycle through our criminal courts cannot continue,” said Sharon Keller, Presiding Judge of the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals and the Vice Chair of the CSG Justice Center Board of Directors. “The task force I am leading has begun to examine how we can better identify people with mental illnesses and help judges and other professionals to address more effectively their mental health needs and options.”

The policy forum in Atlanta will help the chief justices get started on leading collaborative efforts to improve outcomes for individuals with mental illnesses. The chief justices are accompanied by several high-ranking officials from their states’ criminal justice and mental health systems. They will consider a wide range of strategies ranging from how to improve police interactions with people with mental illnesses at the time of arrest to reentry strategies for this population. The task forces will then work to implement these strategies over the next year with help from the CSG Justice Center and the National GAINS/TAPA Center.

The CSG 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

The National GAINS/TAPA Center is a resource and technical assistance center for state planning and coordination among the mental health, substance abuse, and criminal justice systems. The GAINS Center focuses on the application of science to services and the documentation and promotion of evidence-based and promising practices in program development.

The support to the state task forces is made possible through generous grants awarded from the JEHT Foundation and the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. Funding support 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 System Administration.

For more information on the Chief Justices’ Criminal Justice/Mental Health Leadership Initiative, please visit http://consensusproject.org/JLI/info/jli_announce/updates-JLI/ChiefJustice_taskforce.

For more information on the CSG Justice Center, please visit <http://justicecenter.csg.org/>.

###