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Immediate Release

Presiding Judge Sharon Keller to Lead Statewide Task Force as Part of National Initiative to Improve Judicial Responses for Persons with Mental Illness

The Council of State Governments Justice Center announced today that Texas's Court of Criminal Appeals has been selected to participate in the [*Chief Justices' Criminal Justice / Mental Health Leadership Initiative*](#), a national project designed to assist state supreme court chief justices in guiding efforts in their state to improve the response to people with mental illnesses in the criminal justice system.

The CSG Justice Center solicited applications from chief justices across the country interested in establishing a statewide task force on criminal justice / mental health issues. Twenty-three states submitted applications for the initiative, from which seven were selected. As part of the initiative, the task forces will receive technical assistance, access to leading national experts, and funding support. The Justice Center will also convene a two-day national policy forum for the seven states in the spring to help the states selected in implementing the initiative.

Evelyn Stratton, Associate Justice of the Ohio State Supreme Court and co-chair of the advisory board that reviewed the applications, congratulated leaders in Texas: "The application 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. Texas 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 year."

The announcement was made in Texas by Representative Jerry Madden, in a House Corrections Committee hearing. Representative Madden is a member of the governing board of the Justice Center. "Addressing the challenges posed by mentally ill persons in our court system is critical to reduce recidivism and increase public safety, and I am proud that Texas has been selected to lead the way in this area," said Representative Jerry Madden.

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice reports that 30% percent of the people incarcerated in the state have a prior service history with the public mental health system. "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, has significant implications for the administration of our judicial system," said Presiding Judge Keller. "The Task Force that I will be leading will be reviewing court processes to make recommendations that can facilitate the identification of mentally ill persons in the court system and help courts more effectively address, as appropriate to the particular case, the mental health needs of this population."

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 sentences to incarceration. This makes them familiar faces in our nation's courtrooms.

"Improving outcomes for people with mental illness involved in the criminal justice system requires extensive collaboration among leaders in the judiciary, the legislature, and the administrators of multiple state agencies," said Mass. Rep. Mike Festa and Chair of the Justice Center Board of Directors, "We

established this initiative because in many states, a state supreme court's chief justice is uniquely positioned to convene and lead a multi-branch discussion on this issue that leads to real, meaningful action."

The membership of the Texas Task Force includes:

Sharon Keller – Presiding Judge, Texas Court of Criminal Appeals

Robert Duncan - State Senator

John Bradley – Williamson County District Attorney

David Gutierrez – Lubbock County Sheriff

Mary Anne Wiley – General Counsel, Office of the Governor

Jim Bethke – Director, Texas Task Force on Indigent Defense

Mike Maples – Texas Department of State Health Services, Director Mental Health/Substance Abuse

Dee Wilson – Director, Texas Correctional Office on Offenders with Medical or Mental Impairments

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. This project is coordinated through the Judges' Criminal Justice / Mental Health Leadership Initiative, managed by the Justice Center in partnership with the National GAINS Center. The support to the state task forces is made possible through 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 Judges' Criminal Justice / Mental Health Leadership Initiative, please visit

<http://consensusproject.org/JLI>.

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