

Texas Judicial Council Mental Health Committee

Some 7 million Texans suffer from mental illness; for 1.5 million, their mental illness is severe. Increasing numbers of people with mental illness are intersecting the criminal and civil justice systems, with exponential impacts on themselves, their families, and the wider community. Community resources available to assist the courts in identifying, understanding, and properly adjudicating cases involving mental illness are often poorly understood, difficult to access, or unavailable, particularly in economically disadvantaged and rural communities. At the same time, advances in scientific understanding and clinical treatment of disorders of the brain are creating new options for assessing and treating mental illness. While the judiciary is but one stakeholder in a highly fragmented and under-capacitated system intended to meet the needs and facilitate the recovery of those suffering from or affected by mental illness, Texas has realized improvements in the administration of justice on other highly complex issues through long-term, judicially-led, interdisciplinary initiatives. Examples are the Texas Access to Justice Commission and the Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth and Families. These models may prove helpful to designing and implementing strategies that improve the administration of justice for those suffering from or affected by mental illness and co-occurring conditions, including substance abuse.

To explore these issues further, a Mental Health Committee of the Council is proposed.

The Committee would be charged with the following:

- Gathering stakeholder input, and examining best practices in the administration of civil and criminal justice for those suffering from or affected by mental illness;
- Identifying and reviewing systemic approaches for diversion of individuals with mental illness from entering the criminal justice system;
- Making recommendations to the Judicial Council on (1) systemic approaches for improving the administration of justice in cases involving mental health issues; (2) strategies to foster meaningful multi-disciplinary collaboration, enhance judicial leadership, develop and implement technology solutions, and explore potential funding sources; and (3) whether a permanent judicial commission on mental health should be created; and
- Recommending legislative changes that will improve the administration of justice for those suffering from or affected by mental illness and recommendations for diversion from the justice system, for consideration by the 85th Texas Legislature commencing in January 2017.

The chair and five additional members of the committee would be appointed by Chief Justice Hecht.

Six additional advisory members of the committee from the judiciary, bar, and from interested members of the public with expertise on mental health issues would be appointed by Chief Justice Hecht (3) and Presiding Judge Keller (3).

The Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute has volunteered to provide assistance to the Council and this committee.