

Interview with Chief Justice Reiber

NATIONAL JUDICIAL TASK FORCE TO EXAMINE STATE COURTS' RESPONSE TO MENTAL ILLNESS

Chief Justice Reiber discusses the Task Force's work and goals.

In the first of eight interviews of the National Judicial Task Force Executive Committee members, Vermont Chief Justice Paul Reiber, a Task Force co-chair, discusses why the Task Force is needed, why he thinks its work will lead to positive changes, and what challenges his state is facing.

Q: Why do we need the task force?

A: Case management is complex. There are few solutions that provide a simple answer to the problems presented. Mental health and behavioral health fit squarely in this category. Our current system often struggles to understand and accommodate mental health challenges, leading to outcomes that can perpetuate the problems that bring people to court in the first place. Our Task Force combines the expertise and diverse interests of experts in the field to secure creative solutions to the complex problem of litigants in every docket who present mental and behavioral health challenges in the cases in which they are involved.

Q: How can we ensure that the task force's work leads to real change?

A: Through hard work, collaboration, and a little luck, we expect great success. Our organizational structure follows a process we employed to address opioids and addiction in the courts, resulting in a widely acclaimed report and recommendations issued one and a half years ago. We have formed three committees: Criminal Justice; Civil, Probate, and Family; and Education, Partnerships, and Implementation, each co-chaired by a CCJ-COSCA member. While the criminal justice system rightly receives much of the focus in the broader conversation about mental health and the courts, the Task Force's holistic approach ensures that we consider the way that mental and behavioral health affects the entire judicial system. We have a strong foundation for our work through parallel resolutions passed by each of the two conferences (CCJ and COSCA). Funding is through a grant from the State Justice Institute. Expert staffing is provided by the National Center for State Courts. Accountability for each of the committees is secured through an executive committee that meets monthly and through regular reporting to the two conferences by the co-chairs.

Q: What's the situation in your state as it relates to the needs of individuals with serious mental illness who find themselves in the courts?

A: Vermont shares in the challenge that other states face in this area. Our courts see the behavioral health overlay in cases in all dockets. While our state is smaller in population, economic instability and lack of public transportation and connectivity tend to aggravate mental health challenges in the courts in rural areas of the state, but more populated sections also face similar problems. We are like other states with small populations: the problems are the same and the resources are limited. As a result, there is a tremendous benefit to be conferred on our state through the anticipated success of this project. As co-chair and the Chief Justice of Vermont, I am enormously grateful for the support of SJI, NCSC and all of those 40 or more expert volunteers serving on our committees.

