

Interview with Tonnya K. Kohn

South Carolina State Court Administrator

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

Tonnya Kohn discusses the Task Force's work and goals.

In the sixth of eight interviews of the National Judicial Task Force Executive Committee members, South Carolina State Court Administrator Tonnya Kohn, Co-chair of the Civil, Probate, and Family Justice Work Group, discusses how the Task Force's work will lead to real change, what she hopes the Work Group will accomplish, and what challenges South Carolina is facing.

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

A: Bridges, relationships, and infrastructure. I think the creation of the National Judicial Task Force to Examine State Courts' Response to Mental Illness is a great next step toward solidifying existing relationships among the courts and mental health leaders, providers, and educators. And, since its inception I've seen many other relationships created within states and across the country. By talking to each other and reaching out, we have found that we have common interests. Once those bridges have been built and trust developed as a result of the relationships, we can begin building an infrastructure that will stand the test of time and, ultimately, lead to real change. I envision a standing national task force of courts, mental health leaders and educators leading these changes.

Q: What do you hope the Civil, Probate, and Family Justice Work Group accomplishes?

A: I think our work group has already accomplished my first goals, which were to learn from one another and build bonds around this work. That happens every time we meet. In addition to the work that we are doing, my hope is that members of our work group will form the nucleus of, perhaps, a standing state and national effort that takes us beyond the life of our current task force. This is work that takes strong and sustained leadership. The members of our task forces can be the future of this work.

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: There is still a lot of work to be done, but for at least 20 years, South Carolina has invested in mental health courts in small, medium, and large counties throughout the state. These courts have been a joint effort of the South Carolina Judicial Branch, mental health agencies, mental health care and substance abuse care providers, solicitors, public defenders, law enforcement, and many others who care about this issue. Our commitment to recognizing the need to treat defendants qualified to participate in our mental health courts remains strong, including providing a mental health court for juveniles.