

Supreme Court of Wisconsin: Summit looks to improve criminal justice system response to mental illness

Posted on Monday, Apr 24, 2023

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Madison, Wisconsin (April 21, 2023) – Is there a better way for Wisconsin’s criminal justice system to respond to people with mental illness? If so, what does such an approach look like?

About 200 people, including criminal justice system partners, judges, law enforcement officials, policy makers and treatment service providers, gathered Friday in Madison to consider those questions, and to exchange ideas on the topic at the Chief Justice’s Summit on Mental Health.

The summit was called to encourage collaboration and look for solutions across agencies and disciplines, said Chief Justice Annette Kingsland Ziegler. Too often, people with mental health issues end up in custody during a crisis, instead of getting treatment they need, and law enforcement officers end up spending more time handling cases that fall outside their areas of expertise, Ziegler said.

“I am very optimistic that after today, we all will be working toward a new and brighter future to improve options for those who have mental health issues and those responders who have limited options,” Ziegler said during opening remarks.

Some of the state’s top criminal justice system officials described challenges their agencies face, such as staffing shortages and lack of funding that can impact other

parts of the justice system.

Participants in a panel discussion titled, Justice System Partner and Legislative Perspectives, featured Wisconsin Attorney General Josh Kaul; Sen. Jesse James (R-Altoona); Rep. Dora Drake (D-Milwaukee); State Public Defender Kelli Thompson; Wisconsin District Attorney Association President and Fond du Lac County District Attorney Eric Toney; and Oshkosh Police Chief Dean Smith, who is also the president of the Wisconsin Chiefs of Police Association.

Another panel, featuring a range of local officials, crisis service providers, and treatment experts, highlighted successful local mental health crisis response models from across the state. Dr. Margie Balfour, an associate professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Arizona College of Medicine - Tucson, presented on an Arizona Mental Health Crisis Receiving model that has gained national attention. Judges and court staff on another panel discussed the benefits of a model program in Miami that emphasizes the importance of community collaboration.

Chief Justice Ziegler encouraged attendees to take advantage of best practices, whether those ideas come from local or national examples. Ziegler is a member of the Conference of Chief Justices, which encourages states to undertake a collaborative, coordinated approach to improving the criminal justice system's response to people with mental illness.