

Illinois Mental Health Summit  
Call to Action  
October 21, 2020

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Thank you, Michele (O'Brien) for your kind introduction.

And thank you to the State Justice Institute (SJI), the National Center for State Courts (NCSC), and the Illinois Supreme Court Mental Health Task Force, for all you have done to make this Summit a success. I am sure that everyone who participated in this educational journey over the past four weeks has gained new insights and perspectives and feels enlightened and encouraged by our speakers' presentations.

Did you hear what I heard?

We touched on so many topics: accountability; angst about COVID; looking for the canary in the coal mine; there is no justice without equity and inclusion; there is an enormous cost

for using the criminal justice system as our *de facto* mental health system – the fiscal impact is astronomical; there are silos; too often those with mental illness feel that their fate is in the hands of people who do not know them; those who suffer from mental illness become eternal defendants and believe the system works to silence their voices; trauma is a virus and it has taken center stage; public attitudes need to change; we need to look at “health versus illness” and mental illness, not as character but chemistry; is the criminal justice system just?; racial trauma and racial disparity permeate our society and our systems.

These are only a few of the thoughts and questions that our national and state experts shared with us and asked us to consider.

If you are feeling a bit overwhelmed, remember what Desmond Tutu said:

*“How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.”*

Fortunately, not one of the experts we heard speak was pessimistic, or said these struggles and challenges are too daunting, too difficult, or impossible to overcome. Instead we heard: There is no wrong door; we look under every rock we can for funds for mental health initiatives; we *can* build bridges and safety networks; the pandemic gives us that “once-in-a-lifetime” chance to act; we are trying to set prisoners up for success when they go home; partnership matters; policy can change systems; there is a “silver lining” in the pandemic; it is time for paradigm shifts; and Illinois can be a leader!

We even heard a spontaneous and heartfelt call to action from the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice Director Heidi

Mueller – she expressed her belief that “each of us, individually and together, must examine our own actions, analyze them with data and transparency, and then go out and make a difference!”

Last year in South Dakota, when the Illinois Supreme Court’s Mental Health Task Force undertook its mission, it was determined to find a path to improving our response to persons with mental illnesses as part of a national initiative.

In Illinois, we wanted to be certain that we approached this goal in a way that embodied compassion and hope—human qualities. We know that to improve both the criminal justice system and the health system, will take collaboration, cooperation, and coordination. Partnership!

I invite you –individually, as stakeholders, and as members of each of our 3 branches of government— to join the Court and

the Task Force in the important mission of effectuating meaningful change by discovering and implementing solutions in our communities and in our justice and health systems.

We all know that we are at a watershed moment in America, and certainly in Illinois, regarding the problems faced by persons with mental illness. Let us have the courage, the conviction, and the dedication to collectively make a difference.

Mental illness touches all of us. Statistics show that we, or someone in our families, has already been affected by mental illness, or will be affected at some point during our lives. We must speak with one voice about the importance of addressing the problems and issues surrounding mental illness, as well as the need to make mental health a priority in our national and state dialogue. We must use this opportunity to remove mental illness from the shadows, eliminate stigma, and build

momentum for important change. We can reach our goals by encouraging innovation, by building efficiencies in the use of existing resources, and by discovering new resources and funds.

Let your voices be heard!

The Task Force will share its written report with you in January. We will then invite you to help us address some of the solutions you shared with us today and in your surveys.

Stay tuned. Have hope!