

Interview

with Chief Justice Brutinel

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

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

In the fifth of eight interviews of the National Judicial Task Force Executive Committee members, Arizona Chief Justice Robert Brutinel, Co-chair of the Civil, Probate, and Family Justice Work Group, discusses how the Task Force's work will lead to real change, what he hopes the Work Group will accomplish, and what challenges his state is facing.

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

A: Real change takes time and requires changes in how we operate and in how our justice system views mental illness. I anticipate that the work of the Task Force will lead to model programs and best practices which courts across the nation will adopt. At the same time, education about mental illness, how to recognize it and learn what works to address it, along with the adoption of best practices for treatment, will foster better understanding of people who suffer from mental illness and better outcomes and demonstrate the benefit of system improvements.

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

A: Of course, I hope we can inspire real system change. For better or worse, the justice system is a primary gateway for people to access treatment for mental illness. Our group is working to create real practical solutions and programs addressing the incidence of mental illness at all levels of court and for all case types including civil, domestic relations, and juvenile. Educating judges and other court employees about mental illness and how to recognize it and creating better opportunities for accessing mental health treatment in the justice system will help us better serve citizens using the justice system.

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: Improving, I think, but it's a work in progress. We've taken steps to implement the sequential intercept model on a countywide basis throughout the state. We are working to collect better data on the prevalence of mental illness and trying to determine whether minorities are underserved with access to court-provided mental health screening and treatment.

Arizona has implemented AzCourtCare.org, providing links for immediate help, process information, and resources. We have made significant rule and statutory changes – including restoration to competency in limited jurisdiction courts, enhanced service orders, amendment of PAD among others, along with additional civil (Title 36) and criminal (Title 13) statutory and system improvements. We continue to expand the use of therapeutic and problem-solving courts, we have created a mental health case repository, and we require and are funding clinical liaisons.

We are providing training online and in person to judges and court personnel including recognition of and response to those with a mental illness. We have expanded restoration to competency training for providers and judges.

Additional recommendations and changes can be found at <https://www.azcourts.gov/cscommittees/Mental-Health-and-the-Justice-System>.