



NEWS RELEASE

**New York State
Unified Court System**

**Hon. Joseph A. Zayas
Chief Administrative Judge**

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Judicial Task Force on Mental Illness Issues First Report, With Initial Steps for Reform

NEW YORK—A statewide group of experts from various disciplines formed in 2024 to advance reforms to better address the behavioral health issues of justice-involved persons, has released its initial report, with recommended first steps for implementation over the next year.

Convening multiple times since its inception, the UCS Judicial Task Force on Mental Illness conducted its study under the guidance of former co-chair Hon. Jacqueline Sisson, who retired in 2024, and co-chair Hon. Matthew D’Emic, Kings County Supreme Court-Criminal Term Administrative Judge and Presiding Judge of Brooklyn’s Mental Health Court. Hon. Cheryl Roberts, Hudson City Court’s Behavioral Health Court’s Presiding Judge, is the newly appointed co-chair.

“The burgeoning mental health crisis in New York and nationwide makes it imperative that New York’s courts, which long have been the national leader in offering treatment options to persons in need, now work harder than ever to do our part in addressing that crisis. I am determined to move forward on the Task Force’s initial recommendations and eagerly await forthcoming ideas from that diverse group of experts as we seek to develop more holistic, effective justice system responses for children, youth, and adults with behavioral health and co-occurring disorders,” said Chief Judge Rowan D. Wilson who, along with Chief Administrative Judge Joseph A. Zayas, appointed the advisory panel.

“The Task Force has made significant strides in its inaugural year as reflected by the thoughtful proposals outlined in this report—with many more ideas for reform forthcoming—as we seek to best serve the justice needs of New Yorkers with mental illness,” said Chief Administrative Judge Zayas.

“The UCS judicial leadership team is grateful to Judges Sisson and D’Emic for their deft leadership, and to the Task Force members for their ongoing commitment, in advancing this crucial mandate. We look forward to working with Judge Roberts in her new role as co-chair and to the reforms to come under her and Judge D’Emic’s direction,” said First Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Norman St. George.

The initial steps proposed by the Task Force, developed by subcommittees based on the Sequential Intercept Model—a framework that identifies five points where people with mental illness can be diverted from the justice system and connected to services—include:

- Establishing a pilot Assisted Out-Patient Treatment model with ongoing judicial involvement to evaluate whether patients who participate under this model are more successful in avoiding hospitalization, homelessness, and further criminal justice involvement than those who receive AOT as currently practiced in accordance with Kendra’s Law; the role of the judge and the court has typically been limited in administering court-ordered assisted out-patient treatment for persons with histories of mental illness as authorized by Kendra’s Law (MHL 9.60).
- Launching a one-year planning process to establish Mental Health Courts in Family Court, with a focus on addressing youth presenting with mental health issues in the Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Parts; and families with mental health issues in the Custody and Visitation Parts
- Establishing regional Mental Health Courts in less populous rural counties, thus pooling resources to improve access to diversion opportunities for defendants with mental illness
- Developing an internal dashboard to improve tracking and management of competency (Article 730, fitness to proceed) cases
- Updating the competency (fitness to proceed) evaluation order form

“I extend my sincere thanks to Chief Judge Wilson and Chief Administrative Judge Zayas for their steadfast support of the Task Force. Their leadership is instrumental in advancing our critical work. I also express my deep appreciation to the Task Force members for their unwavering dedication, compassion, and hard work in addressing the complex challenges surrounding mental illness in our justice system and putting forth recommendations for the Chief Judge’s consideration as we continue our work,” said Judge D’Emic.

“I am honored to join Judge D’Emic and the Task Force members to help facilitate the group’s work to achieve the goals set by Judges Wilson and Zayas. Their leadership, and the recommendations of this expert and multidisciplinary Task Force, are more important than ever as the number of people with mental illness coming into our courts continues to grow,” said Judge Roberts. “I look forward to being part of the Task Force’s ongoing work and supporting implementation of the recommendations contained in its report.”

The Task Force’s full report is available online at <https://ww2.nycourts.gov/nys-judicial-task-force-mental-illness/index.shtml>

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