



**NEWS from the Shelby County Mayor's Office**  
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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**SHELBY COUNTY GOVERNMENT SET TO DOUBLE CAPACITY OF  
MENTAL HEALTH COURT**

*County to use federal funds to expand access to mental health care and improve public safety.*

**Shelby County, TN** – Today, Shelby County Mayor Lee Harris, General Sessions Court Judge Gerald Skahan, Chief Public Defender Phyllis Aluko, and District Attorney General Amy Weirich announce an expansion of Shelby County's Mental Health Court.

According to the United States Department of Justice, more than two-thirds of inmates in local jails have or have had a mental health problem, compared to approximately 20% of the general population. The World Health Organization has recognized this problem and recommends that people with mental illness be diverted from the criminal justice system to the mental health system.

Nationwide, the creation of Mental Health Courts is one way that local governments have attempted to balance the obligation of the criminal justice system with helping those accused of crimes who have severe mental illnesses and co-occurring substance abuse issues. Mental Health Courts aim to connect the accused with appropriate mental health supports instead of incarceration. These programs do not just benefit the accused, they reduce crime. Participants in mental health courts have lower rates of recidivism than individuals who go through the traditional criminal justice system.

**Shelby County Mayor Lee Harris:** "Investment in access to mental health resources can help reduce crime in our community. Participants in mental health courts are less likely to reoffend than those

who go through the traditional criminal justice system. Mental Health Court changes lives and we are thrilled to expand its capacity to serve.”

**Shelby County General Sessions Court Judge Gerald Skahan:** “We opened the Shelby County Mental Health Court to help those who are living with severe, often untreated, mental illnesses and have become entangled in our criminal justice system. All too often everyone has given up on our participants, but we refuse to do so. These additional resources will allow us to double our capacity to serve Shelby County residents.”

**Chief Public Defender Phyllis Aluko:** “We have a moral responsibility to connect those who are living with severe mental illnesses to appropriate mental healthcare in lieu of incarceration. Our office supports the mission of the Mental Health Court and stands ready to work with all necessary stakeholders to expand available critical services for our clients and the community at large.”

**District Attorney General Amy Weirich:** “The Mental Health Court allows us to properly serve non-violent offenders who suffer from severe mental illness with the appropriate resources. For many offenders, this intervention prevents future criminal conduct and puts them on a path toward becoming a productive citizen.”

**About the Shelby County Mental Health Court:**

Shelby County Mental Health Court was established in 2016 and is presided over by Shelby County General Sessions Court Judge Gerald Skahan. Mental Health Court provides healthcare, counseling, housing assistance, and employment assistance as an alternative to incarceration. Qualifying participants suffer from severe mental illness and have been charged with a nonviolent crime. In lieu of incarceration, participants can enter the Mental Health Court program and receive a mental health treatment plan. Mental Health Court meets weekly to address their current caseload.

Shelby County Government included funds to expand Mental Health Court in the American Rescue Plan Act Budget approved by the Shelby County Board of Commissioners.

(End of Release)