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**LOCAL LEADERS WELCOME HONORABLE STEVEN LEIFMAN FOR DISCUSSION OF
MENTAL HEALTH AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM**

Mental health and criminal justice have long intersected. Law enforcement often is the lone responder to those who suffer from serious and untreated mental illnesses. Arrests lead to jail and the court process, when treatment for nonviolent offenders might be better suited to cure the root cause of their offenses.

State Attorney Melissa Nelson, Sheriff Mike Williams, Public Defender Charlie Cofer, and representatives from the city and mental health community heard from an award-winning pioneer who has reformed the system in Miami-Dade County.

The Honorable Steven Leifman of the 11th Judicial Circuit visited the State Attorney's Office to meet local leaders who are seeking ways to reduce arrests, save taxpayer dollars, and improve the community by helping nonviolent offenders with serious mental issues through treatment instead of arrests.

"Today was an opportunity to talk with dedicated stakeholders, identify system gaps, and find ways to improve our response," said Nelson. "By doing so, we can better serve those individuals with mental health issues and improve public safety."

Leifman in 2000 spearheaded the creation of the Criminal Mental Health Project to divert misdemeanor offenders with mental and substance abuse disorders into supervised community-based treatment and support services. The approach includes local law enforcement, service providers, and the courts. Results have been significant — arrests and recidivism rates have significantly declined, the county was able to close a jail, officer-involved shootings dropped, and bond ratings increased.

"We have been using the criminal justice system to treat a public health crisis," said Leifman. "Doing this the right way leads to so many benefits to the community."

Under Leifman's continued leadership, Miami-Dade County in 2020 is scheduled to open a Mental Health Diversion Center that will act as a one-stop shop for those with mental health issues who most frequently interact with the criminal justice system.

"This is the right time to have this conversation," said Williams. "What Judge Leifman has done in Miami-Dade County on this issue is impressive. We saw today that Jacksonville has great partners in place to tackle this important issue. JSO is committed to being a part of this conversation and part of creating the solutions for our community."