

Demystify courts, Chief Justice Lewis urges lawyers

Ocala — The jury room at the Marion County Courthouse turned into a makeshift classroom today with attorneys and local judges as students and Chief Supreme Court Justice Fred Lewis as their teacher.

A group of about 60 lawyers and judges gathered for Justice Teaching Institute. The goal was to gather information and lesson plans to bring to area schools. The training is Lewis' passion. And since his appointment to chief judge, the West Virginia native has made this a priority.

"We're not trying to make them lawyers or judges, we're trying to make them good citizens," Lewis told the group.

Lewis began volunteering at high schools for about 9 years and brought cases for classrooms to debate. One lesson he recommends for middle and high school students is a lesson about the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution, which deals with warrants, seizures and other police searches.

Attorney-turned-teacher Doug Oswald attended the training sessions. He said he saw a need for civics education in school when he decided to make a career change. Oswald teaches at Marion Technical Institute.

"I really started realizing the impact of civic education. I wasn't satisfied with the quality of citizens we were producing," he said of his career change.

It is the goal of Lewis to have two legal professionals assigned to each local school. The volunteer judges and attorneys would be expected to visit the classroom about once every 45 days.

"I do think we can make can all collaterally make a difference," he said, adding that most citizens think of courts as a "mystical place."

"The more they know about what we do and who we are the more they trust us," Lewis said.

After the event, Lewis talked to the Star-Banner about his recent appointment of Miami Judge Steve Leifman as special adviser for criminal justice and mental health issues. The appointment came just months after the Department of Children and Families came under fire for lack of mental health beds in the state.

"This is a hairy monster to deal with," Lewis said.

He describes Leifman as a "diffuser of information."

Leifman reports to the chief justice once a week to update him on trends, problems and feedback received from legal professionals. Lewis then issues recommendations to DCF

Secretary Bob Butterworth and legislators.

He said it is essential for judges to provide their thoughts on the issue.

"We are a depository in essence for the mentally ill who aren't taken care of in society," he said. "The question is not whether we can cure the mentally ill. The question is, can we provide better solutions and policies in handling the mentally ill?"

For more information about the Justice Teaching Institute visit www.justiceteaching.org.