

2023 Mental Health Legislative Update

Speaker

Before joining the Judicial Commission for Mental Health in 2020, Kama Harris worked as a criminal defense lawyer, defending hundreds of adult and juvenile clients at all levels of the Texas criminal justice system. She began her legal career at a public defender's office, working as a mitigation specialist for death penalty cases. In that role, she gained instrumental insight on the way trauma, poverty, racism, mental health, and intellectual and developmental disabilities had an impact on her clients, their families, the community, and the legal system. Ms. Harris utilized that knowledge during her time as the First Assistant Public Defender in Burnet County, as an attorney in private practice, and now as a staff attorney with the JCMH.

Kama Harris



Summary



This conference introduced trial lawyers to the manifestations of common mental illnesses, deficiencies, and other conditions which affect our ability to communicate with and present complete pictures of our clients. Attendees were taught how to work with mental health professionals and their clients to present a compelling case for life. This program also provided training in trial topics to include juvenile Mental Health/Chapter 55 and factors to consider when working with clients who have a mental illness.

Kama presented updates on mental health law after the 88th Legislative Session. During the 88th Legislative Session, JCMH leaders, Commissioners, Collaborative Council Members, and staff served as resources for the Legislature for all bills related to mental health law. Twelve JCMH proposals were adopted by the Judicial Council; six of those proposals passed and became law on September 1, 2023.

Using SIM Mapping and County Mental Health Law Planning to Build Momentum in Your County

Speakers

Kristi Taylor



Kristi Taylor is the Executive Director of the Texas Judicial Commission on Mental Health (JCMH). She has over 25 years of experience as an attorney and policymaker. After receiving a BBA with Honors in Finance from the McCombs School of Business and a Juris Doctorate from the University of Texas School of Law, Taylor represented children and parents in the child welfare system for seven years. In 2006, Taylor was selected by the Supreme Court of Texas to create the Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth, and Families. She later served as a Staff Attorney and Assistant Director of the Children's Commission. In 2017, Ms. Taylor spearheaded the planning for a new judicial commission on mental health and was named the Executive Director in 2018.

Molly Davis brings juvenile law subject-matter expertise and dedication to working with at-risk youth to the Judicial Commission on Mental Health. Prior to joining the JCMH team in 2020, she served as a prosecutor in the Tarrant County Criminal District Attorney's Office for 12 years. Ms. Davis was assigned to the Juvenile Division for 6 of those years, handling over 2000 juvenile cases as lead counsel, the majority of which were serious felonies involving matters of mental illness, competency, and complex trauma. During this time, Ms. Davis also served as the program administrator of a juvenile court diversion program for children with sexual behavior problems.

Molly Davis



Summary

This interactive presentation introduced actionable steps for Texas counties looking to make positive change. The instructors led discussions on creating a Mental Health Law Collaborative Workgroup, participating in mapping according to the Sequential Intercept Model, developing action plans, and following through to keep momentum going. Finally, the JCMH laid out how to use the Texas Mental Health Law Plan Checklists to clarify legal roles and create a more efficient, cost-saving, and even life-saving mental health law plan.

