National Courts and Sciences Institute receives grant from State Justice Institute to help Missouri courts prepare for COVID-related litigation

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JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. – Thanks to new national grant funding, six Missouri judges will be trained this year to help educate and lead their colleagues forward as novel COVID-related issues – especially those turning on COVID testing or other emerging scientific evidence – are raised in Missouri courts.

The training will be part of the COVID-19 Case and Evidentiary Support Initiative from the National Courts and Sciences Institute (NCSI), a not-for-profit organization dedicated to enhancing courts' capacity to handle complex and novel scientific evidence. This science-based judicial education institute was one of the first in the United States to receive funding from the State Justice Institute, which Congress established in 1984 to award grants to improve the quality of justice in state courts and to foster innovative, efficient solutions to common issues faced by all courts.

"Nationally, NCSI has found judges are concerned about how courts will navigate COVID-testing evidence, infectious disease evidence, and other emerging scientific evidence likely to be offered in cases spawned by the pandemic," said Supreme Court of Missouri Judge Zel M. Fischer, who currently serves as NCSI president and will be a Missouri delegate to the new initiative. "This grant will allow us to give judges the scientific training they need to handle issues of virology, epidemiology, immunity formation, treatment modalities and outcomes, and vaccine clinical trials and distribution as they manage novel cases arising in both civil and criminal contexts. By 'training the trainers,' the NCSI initiative will give judges statewide the resources they need to manage COVID-related litigation efficiently and effectively."

NCSI has named Circuit Judge Cory L. Atkins of the 16th Judicial Circuit (Jackson County) as deployment coordinator for the national initiative. Atkins, in turn, will coordinate the education of judges in 15 states, including Missouri. He earned NCSI certifications in 2019 relating to healthcare research initiatives.

Missouri's local coordinators will be Deborah Daniels, a retired associate circuit judge from Boone County (in the 13th Judicial Circuit), and Associate Circuit Judge Timothy J. Flook of Clay County (in the 7th Judicial Circuit). Both previously earned NCSI certifications. In addition to Fischer, Missouri's delegates to the initiative are Michael J. Cordonnier, presiding judge of the 31st Judicial Circuit (Greene County); Ryan Horsman, presiding judge of the 43rd Judicial Circuit (Caldwell, Clinton, Daviess, DeKalb and Livingston counties); and Robin Ransom, a judge on the Missouri Court of Appeals, Eastern District.

The initiative's science advisors include Dr. Thomas R. Frieden, former director of the United States Centers for Disease Control under President Barack Obama; Dr. Lawrence Mohr, White House physician to Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. The training coordinator is Dr. Franklin Zweig, former science officer for the United States Senate.

NCSI-certified judges commit to 60 hours of seminar and laboratory education. Certified judges gain demonstrable proficiency in the scientific method, and, in turn, serve to educate and mentor other judges in their home jurisdictions. Due to the pandemic, most course work will be accomplished through video conference. Course topics are expected to include the basic health science of the SARS-Coronavirus 2 pathophysiology; COVID-19 epidemiology; distinctions among COVID-19 tests; clinical trial protocols for and results from COVID-19 vaccines and treatments; acute and chronic care issues; and criteria for qualifying experts in cases involving COVID-19 evidence. Safety permitting, the initiative will culminate in November 2021 in a workshop at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston, South Carolina.

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