Judge Robert Morris Selected to Attend National Landmark Meeting to Reform Foster Care

CLEARWATER – Sixth Judicial Circuit Judge Robert Morris is one of five Florida officials selected to participate in an unprecedented national effort to better protect abused and neglected children who are in the court system.

Next week, Morris, Florida Supreme Court Chief Justice Barbara Pariente and three administrators will join court leaders and representatives of child welfare agencies from every state, the District of Columbia, and three U.S. territories for a summit in Bloomington, MN.

The Sept. 20-23 conference – Changing Lives By Changing Systems: National Judicial Leadership Summit for the Protection of Children – will serve as the springboard for a series of actions designed to reform the way abused and neglected children’s cases proceed through the courts. One of the Summit’s goals is to reduce delays in securing safe, permanent homes for children in foster care. Each state will develop an individual action plan to improve its child protection procedures and programs. Following the Summit, these action plans will be compiled into a National Call to Action for state courts and will launch a collaborative reform plan between the courts and child welfare agencies at state and local levels. More than 40 justices or judges from the states’ highest courts are attending the four-day summit.

Judge Morris is the current chair of the Florida Supreme Court Committee on Families and Children in the Court, whose primary function is to focus on how issues concerning children and families are addressed by the courts and to find better ways to serve them. Since 2002, he has been assigned to the Sixth Circuit’s Unified Family Court, a prototype program that brings all cases involving one family under the jurisdiction of one judge. He has often been called upon for presentations to judicial conferences and the College of Advanced Judicial Studies on the subject of changing family court to better serve families and children.

In addition to Judge Morris and Justice Pariente, those attending from Florida are State Courts Administrator Elisabeth Goodner, Department of Children and Families Secretary Lucy Hadl and Patricia Badland of the Office of Court Improvement.

In May 2004, the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care issued recommendations that call for improving court oversight of foster care cases to reduce delays in placing children safely and permanently in homes. These recommendations, endorsed by the Conference of Chief Justices (CCJ) and the Conference of State Court Administrators (COSCA), will serve as the Summit’s central themes.

The Summit is made possible by a $400,000 grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts to the NCSC, which has conducted extensive research on family courts and child protection. Additional support for this project is being provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, Fostering Results, and the State Justice Institute.

The Pew Charitable Trusts serves the public interest by providing information, advancing policy solutions and supporting civic life. Based in Philadelphia, with an office in Washington, D.C., the Trusts will invest $204 million in fiscal year 2006 to provide organizations and citizens with fact-based research and practical solutions for challenging issues.

Judge Morris has served in the Sixth Judicial Circuit since 1997, when he was appointed to a Pinellas County judgeship by Gov. Lawton Chiles. He was appointed to the Circuit bench in 2001 by Gov. Jeb Bush. For the 17 years prior to his appointment to the bench he was an assistant state attorney or in private practice. He is a graduate of Tarpon Springs High School, the University of Florida and DePaul University School of Law.