



Judicial Profile- Leonard Hanser

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We have a new General Master/Mental Health Commissioner, Leonard Hanser, 42. He is a native of Florida, a graduate of North Shore High School, University of Florida and the University of Virginia law School graduating in 1977. He was a practicing lawyer on Military Trail until his recent appointment. Rumor has it that 45 applied for this position.

Some history of this position might be in order. When Judge Rodgers was a Probate Judge, he realized that he would be completely unable to handle all of the trials and hearings that were coming up in the Myers Act, Baker Act and Marchman Act. On February 1, 1988, he asked Jim Robinson to become a General Master to conduct trials in these three areas, in addition to guardianships and child support hearings. That part of our Court system that deals with chemical and drug dependency and mental health has exploded. We all know about chemical and drug problems. But nationally we now have almost 3 million people with serious mental illness; and only one in five is receiving adequate care. Thirty-five years ago, these mental patients were in State mental hospitals. In the 50's and 60's, new antipsychotic drugs allowed the mentally ill to be treated out of hospitals. This was in line with our national feeling of freedom and civil rights. It is now estimated that not since 1820 has so many mentally ill individuals lived untreated in public shelters and on the streets (the mentally ill are estimated at 30%) and in jails (estimated at 10%). And then the budget cuts. Time Magazine recently reported, "Across the U.S., mental health care had become a shambles-fragmented and misfocused." We all read in an article that a \$1,000,000 Federal start-up program for drug addicts ended and the State Legislature and County provided no continuing funds. This meant a 22% reduction in adult treatment beds in Palm Beach County. This type of budget activity cut the heart out of our treatment programs and centers.

More than 50% of Leonard Hanser's days are spent conducting hearings under the Myers Act, the Baker Act and the Marchman Act. This is in addition to the guardianship and child support hearings. He conducts hearings, makes findings of fact, and makes recommendations to Judge Vonhof. There is usually no one representing the State at these hearings; but experts are called in when necessary, including medical doctors, drug counselors, and various case workers that are knowledgeable and skilled in obtaining information and finding solutions to problems. The usual result of such hearings is an order for the person to either be committed to one of the five County Mental Health Hospitals under the Baker Act, or committed to an alcohol or drug facility for treatment, or to do anything else which would be in the best interests of the person. These orders for either observation or treatment are enforceable by the contempt powers of the Court.

Concerning chemical dependency, Leonard Hanser is a great believer in early education and treatment as opposed to the currently popular “crisis control” and criminal penalties. Commissioner Hanser stresses the word “treatment” because he sincerely believes that this is a disease as opposed to a personality disorder.

When you consider that 80% of all crimes committed by persons are either alcohol or drug related, it seems logical that the best way to attack the crime problem is to solve the alcohol and drug problem. This simple truism had obviously been overlooked by our budget cutters who intend to build more jails, while cutting treatment and cure for addictive personalities.

In 1974, having graduated as a political science major, Commissioner Hanser decided on going to law school rather than becoming a history professor. He still reads a lot of history books. His law practice from 1978 for 16 years had been very close to the people and their individual problems. He fully understands how important his position is to these individual problems.

He married his wife Lisa just before his senior year in college. After receiving her Master’s Degree, she became a 6th grade social studies teacher at Conniston Middle School and has been a “teacher of the year” and head of the department.

Hobbies. Mostly it’s family with Jessica (13) and Daniel (10). Oh yes, and he runs 25 miles a week around the Lake Clarke Shores neighborhood.

We wish Commissioner Hanser the best of luck in working on these problems.