

2009 County Government Priorities

Mentally Ill Inmates/Specialty Courts

With the closure of state hospital facilities, county jails have increasingly become de facto mental health facilities. While counties support the deinstitutionalization effort, it is important to note that resources to assure the care and treatment of the mentally ill to sustain them in the community have been inadequate to prevent an increase in jail admissions that are mostly related to an untreated mental illness.

Mentally ill inmates pose a significant risk in county jails. Jail facilities staff is unprepared to deal with the unique concerns that arise when a mentally ill inmate is housed in facilities that are essentially intended as temporary secure settings while matters are addressed in the justice system. Jails were never intended as treatment facilities for mental illness and other behavioral health conditions.

Recent national studies argue that as many as 60 percent of county jail inmates suffer from some form of behavioral health concern, and a significant portion have a documented mental illness. Diversion programs designed to direct the mentally ill toward treatment resources and away from jails can be helpful, but counties do not have the resources to provide the level of services required for diversion to be successful. An inadequate commitment of state and federal dollars for housing, health care, medication, counseling and life skills services, means these inmates find themselves caught in a revolving

door, often in worse condition with each subsequent admission.

Mental health courts have proven successful, and CCAP supports efforts to assist counties in their expansion and operation. However, counties lack a dedicated and permanent source of dollars to support county efforts in operation of these specialty courts, and the services provided to those under order of the court, to assure successful outcomes. In fact, resources redirected to mentally ill inmates through specialty court and diversion projects often actually drain resources away from those seeking assistance in the community who are not involved in the justice system.

CCAP is convening a task force on the mentally ill in county jails to begin assessing the numbers of affected individuals, with the objective of developing state and national policy goals to direct the mentally ill offenders into treatment that can reduce or eliminate criminal behavior. CCAP also calls upon its state and federal partners to establish a dedicated and permanent source of funding and related resources to redirect mentally ill offenders through specialty and treatment courts.

For more information on mentally ill county jail inmates and mental health courts, contact Brinda Carroll Penyak at (717) 232-7554 x 3137 or bpenyak@pacounties.org.



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