

Decriminalizing Mental Illness: Diversion from Jail to Treatment

For decades, people with serious mental illnesses have been passed back and forth between the mental health and criminal justice systems. Jails nationwide, including Alexandria, house large numbers persons with psychiatric disabilities. A Department of Justice study found that 6-12% of inmates have a serious mental illness (64% have a mental health problem), and the majority of them have a co-occurring substance use problem. And once arrested, persons with mental illness spend more time in jail and cost more to incarcerate than inmates without mental illness.

Why does the Alexandria Adult Detention Center house so many persons with a severe mental illness? Liz Wixson, LCSW, Director of the CSB's Acute and Emergency Care Services, said, "We have seen a significant decline in the number of inpatient psychiatric beds available in our region over the last few years. This problem, coupled with the reality that persons with serious mental illness need access to intensive community support and services to help them live productive lives, has resulted in the large numbers of mentally ill persons entering the correctional system unnecessarily. Alexandria needs to do a better job of coordinating and increasing access to services so that clients can lead law-abiding, healthy lives in our city. If we can succeed in increasing our programs effectiveness by building new relationships, it's a win-win for clients AND the community at large."

While valuable services have existed in Alexandria for years, there was no coordinated effort to effectively address the problem of incarcerating people for behaviors that resulted from a mental illness and lack of access to treatment. This changed a year ago when staff from the CSB, the Sheriff's Office, the Alexandria Police Department, the Alexandria Public Defender's Office and the Commonwealth's Attorney's Office joined together to develop a multiagency approach. This collaboration has resulted in several initiatives to address the problem:

~The Alexandria Detention Center opened a "Re-Entry" Unit to prepare inmates for re-entry into the community. In addition, a CSB Forensic Discharge Planner was hired to help clients leaving the jail obtain services in the community, thereby bridging the gap that often results in re-arrest and re-incarceration.

~The Alexandria Public Defender Office created the Alexandria Jericho Project. This program creates alternative sentencing plans for seriously mentally ill

persons that can be considered by judges in lieu of incarceration. Alternative sentencing plans are community treatment plans that include services such as treatment, housing and supervision.

~The CSB's Detox Program expanded its Jail Diversion Program. This program is a place for police officers to bring persons picked up for "drunk in public" and offers treatment of lieu of incarceration.

~A Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) within the Alexandria Police Department is being developed. CIT programs have been proven to: dramatically improve outcomes in police interactions with persons with mental illness, decrease the arrest rate and reported injuries among persons with mental illness, increase referrals of mentally ill persons into treatment, and decrease the rate of officer injury. In the coming year, a CIT program of 20 Alexandria officers will be created. (The CSB is applying for additional grant funding to further support this initiative.)

The CSB recently received a quarter of a million dollars in on-going grant funds from the state to expand jail diversion efforts. In part, this grant funds:

~A Jail Diversion Coordinator to provide immediate assessment and linkage to services for jail diversion clients.

~A Mental Health Probation Officer in the Office of Probation and Parole to work with CSB staff and other agencies in developing strategies to improve clients' chances for success.

~Funds to purchase services or items that will help clients to be successful in the community, for example, the first month of a group home fee after release from jail.

For more information about the CSB's jail diversion programs, contact Liz Wixson at 703-746-3400.



Efforts at decriminalizing mental illness in Alexandria will only be successful through collaboration. Shown above: Dana Lawhorne, Sheriff; Liz Wixson, CSB Director of Acute Care and Emergency Services; and Dave Baker, Police Chief.