Preventing Incarceration of People with Mental Illness

Support Budget Amendment to Fund Jail Diversion Programs (Item 315 #1s and 315 #9h)
Patrons: Senator Howell and Delegate Yost

The 2011 Virginia statewide jail survey revealed that 25% (6,481) of the jail population had a mental health diagnosis and 12% (3,214) were seriously mentally ill (i.e. schizophrenia, bipolar). Almost 60% of all females and 20% of all males were reported as mentally ill.\(^1\) Clearly there is a more humane way of treating persons with serious mental illness involved in the criminal justice system. And there is a way to provide relief to local jail systems and police officers who often feel ill-equipped to handle such populations.

An important strategic goal for Virginia has been to enhance collaboration between the criminal justice and mental health components of Virginia’s emergency response system. Jail diversion is a primary strategy used to prevent the criminalization and incarceration of people with mental illness. Supporting the development of additional therapeutic assessment law enforcement drop-off capacity is a critical next step in Virginia’s jail diversion continuum to ensure appropriate treatment, divert people with serious mental illness from jail, and maximize officer and community safety.\(^{ii}\)

The therapeutic assessment, or “drop-off” center” for law enforcement, originated as part of the Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) model, a nationally-recognized “best practice” developed in Memphis 20 years ago. A required component of CIT is a “therapeutic assessment location (not a law enforcement or jail facility), or procedures, to streamline access to mental health treatment services in lieu of incarceration when appropriate.”\(^{iii}\)

Drop off centers enable law enforcement officers to take a person requiring a mental health assessment to a secure location instead of the emergency room or jail. The officer can then return to his/her line of duty. A drop off center provides police with a single point-of-entry to the mental health system and provides co-located mental health and substance abuse services, which relieves officers of some of the burden of discriminating between mental health, substance abuse, and other crises.

In Virginia Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT) have expanded and over 2,500 law enforcement officers have been trained in this model. Arlington, Hampton-Newport News, Portsmouth, Rappahannock, and Virginia Beach have or are in the process of establishing secure drop off centers.

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\(^1\) 2011 Virginia Jail Survey; Senate Finance Committee; Public Safety Presentation

\(^{ii}\) Comprehensive State Plan 2012 - 2018, Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities

\(^{iii}\) Massaro, J. (2005). *Overview of the Mental Health Services System for Criminal Justice Professionals*; GAINS Technical Assistance and Policy Analysis for Center for Jail Diversion