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Study recommends ways to keep mentally ill out of jail

A new Johnson County study recommends far more resources and broad coordination of the justice and health systems to help keep the mentally ill out of jail.

The report, released today after 19 months of research, addresses a problem common to communities nationwide. It found that 17 percent of those booked into the Johnson County jail were mentally ill, which meshes with the national average.

The county's initiative has been designated a national demonstration project by the U.S. Department of Justice. It was carried out by groups that included county law enforcement, corrections, the district attorney and mental health experts.

The report makes more than three dozen recommendations and has already resulted in federal grants to fund some initiatives.

"We found there is no single solution," said Karen Wulfkuhle, director of United Community Services of Johnson County, the group that provided a grant to start the study.

While money may not be available now for the vast changes needed to better serve the mentally ill, she said, the report shows what should be.

Each arrest or contact creates an intercept point that can get help to the mentally ill, the report says. Recommendations include:

- Mental health training for police, parole officers and dispatchers.
- More sentencing alternatives and court diversion.
- More treatment, including a therapeutic community at the jail to deal specifically with those dealing with mental illness and substance abuse.
- Greater efforts to involve family.

"The study provides a framework around which we can begin to move our whole system forward," said David Wiebe, director of Johnson County Mental Health.

Treating the mentally ill is better and cheaper than jailing them, he said, but Kansas and other states are cutting funding for mental health. The state cut \$1.7 million from his budget in the last two years, Wiebe said, and a new proposed budget would cut it \$1.5 million more.

Wiebe said the problem is vast. A review of all Johnson County jail bookings in the last five years found about 30 percent of 7,400 inmates had at some point gotten services from Johnson County Mental Health.

But the experts said the collaboration has already resulted in improvements and federal grant money.

- A grant will pay for a mental health expert who will be dispatched with Olathe police in cases involving mental illness.
- The county district attorney will expand the use of a mental health diversion program, thanks to grant money.
- A grant also will pay for a team of experts, including one on mental health, as part of a jail work-release and

re-entry program.

- Proposed state legislation would make it easier for mental health workers and police to share information.

Rise Haneberg, county criminal justice coordinator, said officials also are working to get mental health training to dispatchers in hopes they can help get treatment in play for disturbed people who need it.

“If we can keep them from stepping into the criminal justice system, that is tremendous progress,” she said.

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