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Franklin County Leaders Call for Targeted Overhaul of its Criminal Justice System's Response to People with Mental Illnesses

COLUMBUS, OH—May 13, 2015—On the heels of unveiling a national initiative to address the mental health crisis in U.S. jails, leaders in Franklin County are planning an overhaul of their county's response to people with mental illness in contact with the justice system.

In response to a report released today by the Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center highlighting major disparities in the length of time people with serious mental disorders stay in the Franklin County Jail and the rate in which they're rearrested following their release, county leaders intend to take targeted action based on a list of recommendations also provided in the study.

According to the report, an adult admitted to Franklin County's system stays an average of 17 days, while those with a mental illness languish for nearly double that, 32 days.

"One day in jail could do a lifetime of damage to someone with a mental illness, let alone 30 days," Commissioner Marilyn Brown said. "And if that doesn't reach people on a human level, taxpayers should take issue with the fact that we're paying for a system that does little to reduce recidivism and instead feeds into a cycle of incarceration and strained budgets. The costs are high—to public safety, to the budget and to the lives of our residents—and we are committed to connecting people with mental illness to care and treatment instead of needless incarceration."

About 60 percent of adults with serious mental disorders return to the Franklin County Jail within the three years following their release, the study found, well above the 46 percent of all adults that return in the same time period.

"Ask any sheriff and he or she will tell you that changing how we respond to people with mental illness is a top public safety priority," said Franklin County Sheriff Zach Scott. "These numbers confirm what we've been saying for some time. Like many jails in the U.S., our jails have served as the largest mental health facility in Franklin County and this is not acceptable. Now, we hope to provide resources for those who need to be put on the path to recovery after they are released."

The report also found that a large percentage of people with mental illnesses admitted to jail haven't had contact with mental health services, both prior to incarceration or following their release. As many as 1,000 people with mental illnesses who are at medium or high risk of re-offense have no contact with community-based mental health services the year after their release.

“Clearly, if we are going to do something about our high recidivism rates, we have to do a better job making that connection to treatment,” said Tom Stickrath, superintendent of Ohio’s Bureau of Criminal Investigation and the immediate-past chairman of the Board of Directors for the CSG Justice Center.

“Accomplishing that goal, in part, will depend on increased availability of crisis services and community-based care.”

The report, funded by the Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) and the Jacob & Valeria Langeloth Foundation, offered Franklin County’s leadership a number of recommendations to address the issues they are facing, including:

- Ensure that law enforcement’s response to people with mental illnesses promotes the safety of all involved and facilitates timely and efficient connection to community-based behavioral health care services;
- Use the results of behavioral health screenings and assessments to inform decisions about jail population management and the delivery of behavioral health care services;
- Connect people detained in jail who have behavioral health care needs to community-based behavioral health care services prior to their release;
- Increase the capacity of community-based behavioral health and housing services and prioritize people who are at higher risk of reoffending for such services;

“For judges making bail and sentencing decisions, just knowing a person’s criminal history isn’t enough,” said Franklin County Judge Stephen L. Macintosh. “Science-based tools that tell us someone’s risk of re-offending and some information about a person’s mental health needs helps us make informed decisions about bail conditions, treatment and penalty options.”

Next week, Commissioners will take their first step toward reform, considering a resolution to join [Stepping Up: A National Initiative to Reduce the Number of People with Mental Illnesses in Jails](#). Launched from Capitol Hill last week, Stepping Up, a partnership between the CSG Justice Center, [the National Association of Counties](#) and [the American Psychiatric Foundation](#), provides counties with definitive direction toward developing an action plan to facilitate access to treatment and promote appropriate alternatives to jail while making effective use of budgets.

“Whether in Ohio’s largest cities or in the most rural locations, every county is seeing its jails space taken by people with mental illnesses,” said Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine. “Franklin County has analyzed this issue extensively and now other Ohio counties can draw on their experience.”

The resolution, when approved next week, will commit the county to key actions, including the implementation of a plan that draws on the report’s recommendations and designing an approach to track progress going forward.

A copy of the report and a summary are available on line at <http://www.franklincountyohio.gov/assets/pdf/CSG-Justice-Center-Report.pdf> and <http://www.franklincountyohio.gov/assets/pdf/CSG-Justice-Center-Summary.pdf>

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ABOUT THE CSG JUSTICE CENTER

The Council of State Governments Justice Center is a national nonprofit organization that serves policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels from all branches of government. It provides practical, nonpartisan advice and evidence-based, consensus-driven strategies to increase public safety and strengthen communities. For more information about the Justice Center, visit www.csjusticecenter.org.

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