

Editorial: Mental health court succeeds

By TCPalm Staff

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Writing recently on the problem of mentally ill re-entry into the criminal justice system, Gary Bemby, chairman of the Florida Council for Community Mental Health, said:

There were smiles and tears, handshakes and hugs all around in Circuit Judge Cynthia Cox's courtroom Tuesday afternoon.

The occasion was the third and largest "graduation" for clients in St. Lucie County's mental health court, an intervention program that provides a treatment and counseling alternative for mentally ill people who otherwise might be caught up in a revolving door at the county jail.

As the 20 "graduates" and their family members stood before Cox, who oversees the program, she said, "All of you should really be proud of how you got here."

Under the six-month program, participants must visit doctors, attend counseling sessions, stay on medications and avoid trouble with the law. They receive therapy, housing and transportation assistance and vocational education and job training.

Since it began in June 2006, the program has handled more than 300 misdemeanor and third-degree felony cases.

On Tuesday, criminal charges were dismissed against all those who had successfully completed the program.

Mental health court began in St. Lucie County as a pilot program for the area and so far has saved the county \$500,000 in the cost of jail stays, according to officials, in addition to providing a far more humane and reasonable method of handling the mentally ill who break the law.

Despite a tight year for finances, Martin County officials have included \$70,000 in their upcoming budget to begin a mental health court.

That effort was led overall by Public Defender Diamond Litty and Chief Judge William Roby and, in the county, by Sheriff Robert Crowder and Commissioner Susan Valliere.

"For me, it's an absolute no-brainer," Valliere said. "It's the right thing to do, the

humane thing to do.

In Martin County, an estimated 17 to 20 percent of the 600 people in jail are mentally ill, and jail stays can cost \$125 to \$300 per day, compared to mental health court that can cost about \$33 per day.

In addition, as Crowder said earlier this year, "People with serious mental health issues do not belong in jail. ... They need to be dealt with professionally instead of being warehoused in county jails."

Roby and Litty said they hope to launch mental health court programs in Indian River and Okeechobee counties in the near future and to seek grants to help with funding.

In recent years, the percentage of those with mental illness being housed in county jails on the Treasure Coast has been increasing. Simply providing them with medication has substantially increased the costs of housing them.

Also, because of that increase in inmate population, counties throughout the area have been forced into expanding their jails at major costs to taxpayers.

Mental health court offers a cheaper and more humane way to handle the situation and, as an added benefit, can result in clients becoming productive members of society rather than being a continuing burden.

The program, though in its early stages, appears to be working better than originally hoped. Every county with a similar situation with housing the mentally ill in jail needs something similar.

As of April 2007, there were almost 92,000 inmates in Florida's prisons and more than 44 percent of them had been in prison before.

It is estimated that 20 percent of the prison population has a serious mental illness and nearly three-fourths of those with mental illness also have a substance abuse disorder.

Mentally ill offenders have a higher than average rate of recidivism.

"With 20 percent of the 10,000 ex-offenders released every year having a significant mental illness, we are paying \$120 million annually for their re-entry into the prison system. That is more than our state spends on all children's mental health services in a year."

"Investing in community-based mental health programs that can provide transitional centers and support staff is the key to tracking, counseling and guiding ex-offenders with mental illness toward safe and healthy actions and away from our prison gates."



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