

# On Site Mental Health Screening

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**A**n estimated one in ten youths in America currently suffers from a mental disorder severe enough to cause behavioral impairment. Unfortunately, fewer than one in five of these children will actually receive treatment. The same holds true for many of our adult population who are currently involved in guardianships. Many of these "legally incapacitated individuals" suffer from mental health issues which cannot be met in many of the traditional placements for these wards.

As a public health priority, prevention and treatment for mental health conditions in the United States has fallen far behind all other forms of health intervention and research. With the budgetary constraints on many of our placement options for juveniles and adults, courts today are often perceived as the agency of "last resort" by beleaguered parents, frustrated teachers, and family members who have tried for years to deal with psychological conditions that show up as truancy, incorrigibility, petty offenses, and other seemingly "criminal behavior."

It has become imperative in order to successfully manage our burdened justice services that we attempt to screen this group of children and attempt to offer immediate services to both children and adults with underlying mental health issues.

To that end, the Oakland County Probate Court and Circuit Court-Family Division have teamed with the Oakland County Community Mental Health Authority and Easter Seals in triaging both juveniles and adults as they enter our justice system.

Since August, a Mental Health Casework Specialist employed by Easter Seals has been assisting the court's

Juvenile Intake unit, conducting screening on youths suspected of suffering from some form of mental illness. This screening procedure is also available to adults when they come to our Probate counter in search of guardianship alternatives. They will review the individual's treatment, social and school histories if applicable, and administer tests to determine whether they have a mental health diagnosis. This function is currently completed by court Intake staff, who oftentimes spend hours on the phone attempting to get these families the services they require.

This screening and referral process will significantly improve our response to "special needs" youth and families. It is also anticipated that the court will be more appropriately able to respond to problems by quickly mobilizing resources to these families.

According to Dr. Richard Visingardi, Director of Community Mental Health, this initiative will attempt to reach those individuals whose needs cannot ever really be met by a punitive court experience. We are hopeful that the specialist assigned to assess and refer these individuals can also act as an information clearinghouse on mental health issues, treatment alternatives, and resources for our entire court staff.

What is really exciting about this initiative is that it is the first type of collaboration between the Community Mental Health Authority and Easter Seals with our courts designed to meet the particular needs of our population. The position is fully funded through Easter Seals but will be on site at the court during normal working hours. If you would like more details regarding this initiative, please feel free to contact me. Stay tuned.