



Jail diversion by the numbers

Oakland County works to help mentally ill offenders find better path

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OAKLAND COUNTY — It's been 10 years since Jennifer Shields first began training law enforcement officers to spot signs of mental illness. Though it's been a decade, Shields said she still encounters police who are "blown away" by what they learn from her.

Shields works with Easter Seals in its jail diversion program. Along with Training and Treatment Innovations, Macomb-Oakland Regional Centers and Community Network Services, Easter Seals provides training to law enforcement officers in the tools they need to help mentally ill and developmentally disabled members of the community — including when those citizens commit crimes.

The 'what'

The idea, she said, is to help officers to know their options in situations where a mentally ill or developmentally disabled person commits a nonviolent misdemeanor offense and would be better served with mental health resources than the judicial system, or even incarceration.

If law enforcement in Oakland County identifies a suspect as needing a mental health evaluation, Shields explained, the subject is transported to Common Ground for an evaluation. There, a determination is made whether the person needs to be hospitalized, linked to resources or connected to family.

Oakland County also offers post-booking jail diversion, which means once offenders are convicted and jailed, if evaluators determine that the offenders have a mental illness or a developmental disability, they're assigned a caseworker behind bars.

According to Maj. Chuck Snarey, of the Oakland County Corrections and Court Services Division, the caseworker helps the inmates complete a four-week program while they're in Oakland County Jail, after which they can petition the court for a reduction in their sentence. He said there's about a 30-45 percent success rate with the post-booking jail diversion program, dubbed JAWS for Jail Alliance With Support.

The overall goal with jail diversion is to create a win-win scenario: The offenders win by getting the mental health resources they need instead of entering what could likely be a repetitive and ineffective cycle of incarceration or fines they can't afford.

The other win, Shields said, is for the taxpayers, whose dollars will go toward better uses than paying for inmates who wouldn't benefit from punishment they can't mentally comprehend to sit in jail.

Snarey agreed, saying the program allows the jail to focus more on rehabilitating inmates rather than caring for offenders with special needs who fell into the system from lack of proper care.

“It’s tremendously helpful to us. Since the mental institutions have been closed by the state, it’s almost like the jails are expected to pick up where they left off,” he said. “The patrolmen see someone on the street not necessarily committing a crime but doing something out of the norm, and now our department is trained to know to take these individuals to Common Ground.”

Snarey said that close to 400 inmates at OCJ have some sort of mental health issue. Shields believes the number is even higher, since of the approximately 1,500 inmates at the jail, Easter Seals serves 30 percent for mental illnesses.

The ‘who’

Of course, not everyone with a diagnosed mental ailment qualifies for jail diversion services. Since those with even mild depression and anxiety could be considered to have mental illness, Shields said officers are trained to spot severe symptoms of illnesses and disorders.

“We teach them to identify symptoms such as persons responding to internal stimuli, hyper verbal, not being oriented to person, place or time, hallucinations — either auditory or visual — and delusions,” she explained in an email. “We do not expect police officers to be mental health clinicians; however, the expectation is that during their encounter with an individual they are able to discern that a person is in need of assistance.”

Once the suspect is transported to Common Ground for evaluation, a clinician with master’s degree-level experience in mental health would complete the screening and determine if someone is at a point of “severe or persistent mental illness.”

The ‘why’

According to reports provided by Easter Seals, since the estimated cost of housing an inmate at OCJ is \$104 a day and the average stay is 30 days, the estimated amount that pre-booking diversions have saved Oakland County is over \$6.7 million from 2009-2013.

The highest number of pre-booking diversions during that time was in fiscal year 2012, with 359 spared from incarceration. The number dropped to 261 in 2013 and 221 in 2014.

Shields said the reason for the drop isn’t clear, though it could be attributed to municipal law enforcement agencies handling mental health jail diversion cases on their own and cases going undocumented by Common Ground.

“Our training and outreach has increased over the years, so we can assume — and we’ve actually verified with officers — that they are utilizing our training and providing their own interventions,” she said.

She added that diversions on any scale, whether by individual agencies or through the county’s program and Common Ground’s assistance, could still be considered a cash saver.

Shields said \$6.2 million is spent annually to house people in Oakland County Jail.

“Jail diversion enables better long-term prognosis (for mentally ill offenders) and, quite frankly, frees up resources in jail for violent offenders.”

The ‘how’

Perhaps pre-booking diversions could increase this year thanks to a grant that the Michigan Department of Community Health recently awarded to the Oakland County Community Mental Health Authority, which oversees the nonfunded jail diversion mandate.

The grant, in the amount of \$275,370, will be used specifically to implement a Crisis Intervention Team program in the county and train 80 Oakland County sheriff’s deputies to respond specifically to mental health situations.

Deputies who participate in CIT will receive 40 hours of comprehensive mental health training; have opportunities to speak with advocates, individuals with mental illness and their families; and participate in role-playing scenarios.

Lt. Dorothy Hall, of the Oakland County Sheriff’s Office, said the CIT officers will work much like the county’s K-9 unit in that they will be spread out throughout the county and will be scheduled in different shifts so they can be called upon as needed.

Hall said training could begin as early as next month.

The ‘where’

Jail diversion isn’t the only service offered to the approximately 27,000 Oakland County residents living with varying degrees of mental illness or developmental disability. For more information, visit www.occmha.org or call the Oakland County Community Mental Health Authority at (800) 341-2003.

Learn more about Easter Seals of Michigan at www.easterseals.com or call (248) 475-6400.

To learn more about Oakland County’s jail diversion pre-booking program, visit www.oakgov.com, follow the tabs to the sheriff’s page, and look under Inmate Programs.