

# St. Petersburg Times

## **AIDING MENTALLY ILL INMATES // Grant will pay to help, not just house:[SOUTH PINELLAS Edition]**

*WILLIAM R. LEVESQUE.* St. Petersburg Times. St. Petersburg, Fla.: Mar 13, 2004. pg. 1.B

**Full Text** (696 words)

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Some have hanged themselves with shoelaces, attacked guards or just refused to take medication. Mostly, they sit isolated, growing sicker in a place that cannot adequately treat their mental illness.

To Pinellas-Pasco Public Defender Bob Dillinger, that is the modern vision of the American jail, the de facto repository for the nation's mentally ill.

"It's horror story after horror story," Dillinger said. "And the system is overwhelmed by their numbers."

With a new \$1-million grant from the U.S. Department of Justice, Dillinger's office, working with State Attorney Bernie McCabe and Sheriff Everett Rice, last month launched a diversion program for inmates at the Pinellas County Jail suffering from severe mental illness.

The program aims to identify inmates in need and divert them to treatment outside the jail within 48 hours.

The program, Dillinger said, plugs glaring holes in the current system.

Often, judges won't release inmates unless outside treatment is available. But it can take months for an inmate to qualify for an existing program, Dillinger said.

"People are lingering in the system forever," said Derek Morin, program coordinator. "And if they're released, they often don't have any place to go."

Those inmates are at higher risk of breaking the law again, especially since they usually don't have adequate medication to control their condition, he said.

Dillinger said the diversion program is a bridge, providing funding to get inmates into one of several existing local treatment programs until they qualify for care through traditional methods such as Medicaid or Medicare.

"It's kind of a triage concept of us filling in the blanks until traditional services take

over," Dillinger said.

The program provides transportation, medication and transition to treatment, Dillinger said.

Advocates for the mentally ill say the need is staggering.

With an average daily population of about 3,100 inmates at the Pinellas jail, about 352 inmates at any time suffer from mental health problems severe enough to require psychotropic drugs. Overall, Dillinger's office estimates as much as 40 percent of all inmates suffer from significant mental health problems.

"We see some very sick people," said Victoria Scotti, the jail's health care administrator. "The numbers are trending up. A lot of these people need to be taken out of the jail and hooked up to services. The difficult part is finding somebody a place to go, especially if they require a level of supervision."

With state and federal funding for treatment programs dwindling across the nation over the past decade, jails have increasingly become psychiatric facilities by default, advocates say.

A report by Human Rights Watch in late 2003 said American prisons and jails contain three times more mentally ill people than the nation's psychiatric hospitals. The report estimated that one in six U.S. prisoners suffers from mental illness, including major depression, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

Dillinger said Florida has downsized large state mental health institutions without making provisions for increased spending on community based treatment. Throughout Florida, community programs have actually seen state funding shrink 5 percent in the last five years, he said.

"The jail has become the easy option for the criminal justice system," said Lindsay Hayes, project director for the National Center on Institutions and Alternatives. "It's always there and it's always open and there's always a bed."

Dillinger said he isn't sure how many inmates will be diverted. But he said cost savings are immediate. It costs the jail about \$125 a day to house an inmate, undoubtedly higher for those who suffer from mental illness.


Demonstrating a cost benefit will be important. The grant is for one year and Dillinger will have to find a funding source for 2005.

"We're feeling our way," Dillinger said. "This is a start. If we're successful, we'll find money somewhere."

Hayes said diversion programs aren't unheard of. Many jurisdictions have given them a try. Keeping them for more than a year is the trick. "They run a good program for a year or so, and then the funding stops and the program stops and everybody goes on their way," he said.

## **[Illustration]**

Caption: Patricia Ameen, a nurse at Pinellas County Jail, gives daily medication to inmates in the jail's mental health wing.; Photo: PHOTO, CHERIE DIEZ



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