

Jail Diversion Program Targets Mentally Ill Inmates Needing Treatment

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Armed with a \$1 million federal grant, the Public Defender's Office is working with the Sheriff's Office and state prosecutors to divert mentally ill people out of jail and into private foster homes.

This is intended to help them while saving money for taxpayers.

As of last Wednesday, three weeks after the program began, 17 people had been removed from the county jail and placed in community-based treatment programs, said Public Defender Bob Dillinger, who proposed the idea to Pinellas County Commissioners and who obtained the federal grant.

Although it is too soon to grade the program's success, it is expected to save local tax money by freeing up jail space, relieving jail guards of the job of closely watching mentally ill inmates, and reducing recidivism by getting people meaningful treatment for the mental problems that sometimes prompt them to commit crimes, Dillinger said.

The jail has an average daily population of about 3,000, of whom 15 percent are on psychotropic medications. The Public Defender's mental health division estimates another 25 percent of jail inmates not on such medication have significant mental health problems.

Most of the mentally ill inmates are arrested on misdemeanor charges for crimes such as disorderly conduct, trespassing, shoplifting and domestic violence, according to jail statistics, Dillinger said.

Dillinger's in-house efforts have reduced the waiting time for mentally ill clients to be officially identified as incompetent from a year to about 3 1/2 months. He said the goal of the new program is to cut that to a matter of days, with prosecutors agreeing to drop charges in some cases.

The 17 inmates so far diverted from jail may not sound like many, but Dillinger said that figure is higher than he expected. Although there is no limit to the severity of the charge for someone to qualify, their crimes have to be minor enough to allow for them to be released from jail, he said.

Foster caregivers, who in many cases will be accepting the former inmates into their homes, are allowed to meet and screen their potential charges. And anyone on medication has to agree to continue to take it voluntarily before they will be released.

“That's why temporary foster beds work so well,” Dillinger said. “It is almost always a family-like atmosphere,” and the foster caregivers quickly notice if their charges skip their medications, he said.

The plan is for the mentally ill to remain in foster care for about 60 days while longer-term arrangements are made for their treatment.