

## Pinellas County jail diversion program offers hope

February 9, 2010

The motto of the Sixth Judicial Circuit Public Defender's office succinctly states its mission: "We are the Hope." The words are from Public Defender Bob Dillinger's swearing in ceremony in 1997.

For defendants with mental illnesses and or co-occurring substance use disorders, hope is being rekindled through the Pinellas County jail diversion program initiated under Dillinger's leadership.

The program is a collaboration between the public defender, state attorney, Pinellas County sheriff, the judiciary and local service providers. The program provides access to community-based mental health and substance abuse treatment services, while at the same time addressing the client's involvement in the criminal justice system.

The Pinellas County-Sixth Judicial Circuit Jail Diversion Program (JDP) began in February 2004, thanks to a federal Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) grant of \$993,500. The BJA awarded additional grants in 2005 and 2006 to continue the program. The program has also been expanded to neighboring Pasco County.



**Dillinger**

"This program is enthusiastically supported by the both the Pinellas and Pasco County sheriffs," Dillinger said. "In addition, county commissions in both counties have demonstrated their support by approving funding for the program since 2005."

Pinellas County was awarded a state Criminal Justice, Mental Health, and Substance Abuse (CJMHS) Reinvestment Act grant in 2008, which currently funds the program until June 30, 2010.

The grant helped wipe out an existing wait list—which Dillinger said is now creeping back up—and enabled the program to hire additional staff to see more clients.

Unlike many counties where jail diversion programs are operated by the court system, the Pinellas program is based in Dillinger's office.

Dillinger said he became interested in mental health issues as an assistant public defender in the 1970s when he saw people with mental illnesses, especially those with co-occurring substance use disorders, "being passed back and forth" by the system.

The JDP diverts individuals from the county jail and from state forensic hospitals into treatment. Services provided include behavioral health assessments, psychiatric evaluations, medication therapy, intensive case management, transitional housing and transportation assistance. Program staff serve as liaison to the courts, keeping them informed of clients' treatment progress and informing the treatment team of clients' court dates.

Data compiled by Pinellas County officials since the diversion program began indicate it has been successful in its goal of reducing recidivism.

For the period from 2004 through 2008, there was an overall 91% average reduction in arrests among the 2,357 individuals who had been diverted into treatment. The reduction in arrests following jail diversion has steadily increased from 79% in 2004 to 98% in 2008.

Within 48 hours of referral, potential clients are screened to determine their eligibility for the program. If appropriate, they are referred to a case manager for an intake assessment and orientation to the program. A treatment plan that includes criteria for discharge is then developed.

Treatment begins in jail for those clients still in custody. They are evaluated each month for possible placement into a community mental health or substance abuse treatment program.

Clients are referred to the most appropriate, least restrictive program in the community offered by JDP partner agencies. Many are receiving services on an outpatient basis.

JDP is intended as a short-term program, designed to help stabilize and link clients to more traditional treatment. The length of stay in the program averages three to six months.

Clients who don't receive benefits and can't afford to pay for their treatment generally transition to Suncoast Center's Forensic Focused Outreach program or other community programs where they continue to work toward successfully completing their treatment plan. (See related article.)

Upon release from jail, most clients receive a 30-day supply of medications. Based on the screening conducted by the program coordinator, referrals are made to an appropriate transitional housing program operated by one of the JDP's community partners. The JDP also can provide rental assistance and deposits for a brief time for clients who have found housing on their own but still need some financial help.

While in transitional housing, clients attend weekly meeting/training sessions, are directed to available community services and assisted in making the transition to independent living.

Referring inmates to community-based treatment facilities has resulted in a considerable cost savings to the jail, according to Dillinger. He noted that the cost per day to house a typical inmate in the Pinellas County Jail is \$90, but that cost is higher for inmates with mental illnesses because of the expense of medications and treatment.

"In essence, we've diverted over 2,000 people from the jail," said Dillinger. "At \$90 or \$100 per day in jail costs, there's been a huge savings to the taxpayers."

More recently, the JDP has been expanded to serve clients being discharged from crisis stabilization units who Baker Act lawyers identify as having past criminal justice system involvement, Dillinger said. The current community-based system isn't adequately funded to provide the level of support needed to keep them from recycling back into a CSU, he said.

"Our therapist sees them at least once a week, sometimes two or three times a week," said Dillinger. "We have been able to help about half the people referred to us and keep them from being Baker Acted again."

There are other benefits beyond the cost savings realized from reducing recidivism, Dillinger said. Chief among them is the "non-monetary benefit of decriminalizing mental illness and treating it in an appropriate medical setting," Dillinger said.

"If the concept of mental health evaluation at the time of booking is shown to be effective, state funding and statutory change requiring this type of intervention could follow. The benefits to the safety of the community and the resulting impact to the criminal justice system would be substantial."

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See this article at the Partners in Crisis website at:

[http://www.flpic.org/success-stories.php?news\\_id=2010020914012094](http://www.flpic.org/success-stories.php?news_id=2010020914012094)

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