

Mentally ill need treatment, not jail

A Times Editorial

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Public defender Bob Dillinger wants to keep people out of jail. Naturally, that is his job.

In this instance, Dillinger's focus isn't protecting due process rights of criminal suspects. Dillinger wants to expand to Pasco a program intended to keep the mentally ill from overflowing the county jail in Land O' Lakes.

His diversion program identifies mentally ill inmates after they are booked and places them into less-expensive community programs better equipped to handle their medical and social service needs. There is no shortage of potential clients as jails and state prisons have become warehouses for mentally ill. In Pasco, 44 percent of the 1,300 inmates receive mental health medications, overburdening a jail medical staff and taking up cell space for weeks or months when they would be served more appropriately in adult foster care or a similar treatment center.

It costs an average of \$70 per day to house an inmate at the Pasco jail (more for a mentally ill inmate) but some foster-care bed space is available for half that amount.

"Jail is the least efficient and most expensive way to treat mental health," Dillinger told Pasco County commissioners this week.

Commissioners were the audience because the public defender is seeking \$500,000 from the county as he awaits word on a federal grant application. The money will pay for temporary housing, prescription drugs, a case manager and therapy. Dillinger said he believes the program will divert 100 to 300 people and perhaps as many as 400 from the county jail annually.

The program, financed by a federal grant, began in early 2004 in Pinellas County. There, it plucked 432 people from jail between February and the end of the year with 157 completing the program and 257 remaining in treatment. Only a few got into legal trouble again while being treated. Figuring a daily cost of \$79 to house an inmate in Pinellas, the program saved an estimated \$5.7-million through the end of 2004.

Communities shouldn't be fearful of a broad release of violent criminals. Most of the mentally ill inmates face misdemeanor charges including disorderly conduct, trespassing, shoplifting and domestic disputes, according to information Dillinger provided commissioners.

In Pasco, county budget director Mike Nurrenbrock withheld his recommendation, warning significant financial savings won't be forthcoming. Beds given up by mentally ill inmates won't sit empty for long. They likely will be filled by other criminal suspects who might otherwise be released on their own recognizance because of jail crowding.

But common sense must be considered along with the dollars and cents. Do commissioners want to continue to operate the jail as the county's largest mental health facility or would they rather divert appropriate detainees to more qualified providers?

"If it works, I think it'll be a great idea," said county Administrator John Gallagher.

After Gallagher's acquiescence, commissioners agreed to consider Dillinger's proposal Sept. 7, before the first public hearing on the proposed county budget.

Commissioners should honor the request. It is a sensible investment to help better serve an overlooked population.