

## Prisoners Of Illness

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Legislative reforms are sought so the mentally ill don't have to resort to jail to get help.

The little girl anxiously tugged at her mother's sleeve, pointed to the woman standing behind them and asked, "Mommy, what's wrong with that lady?"

"I don't know honey. She's probably on drugs or something," the mother answered in a voice loud enough for most customers in the convenience store to hear. "Stay away from her."

Debbie Posanti, 39, isn't certain when someone first uttered those words about her, but she is used to being someone others avoid. Questions about her behavior, assumptions that she uses drugs and feelings of isolation have shaped her life.

"People used to stare at me all of the time," said Posanti, who was diagnosed with schizophrenia at age 15. "So I got these piercings to give them something to look at."

The disease has robbed Posanti of her self-esteem, her will to live and her family. In 1996, she nearly died on the streets of Arizona where she worked as a prostitute and became addicted to heroin. She begged to die and even threw herself in front of an oncoming car. She was later arrested on drug charges and served two years in prison.

"The best thing that ever happened to me was going to jail," Posanti said, pausing to take a drag on a hand-rolled cigarette. "I felt safe there. I got my medications, I had something to eat and a place to sleep. I found God.

"Before I went to jail, I would pass churches and scream, "God, please take me to heaven.' "

Jails are the new asylums for the mentally ill, according to Florida Partners in Crisis. This advocacy group made up of health care providers, law enforcement and court representatives, is pushing for \$56 million in legislative reforms this year based on a resource analysis of the Department of Children and Families. It will take \$56 million a year for five years to allow DCF to expand community-based services for mental health and substance abuse, said spokesman Larry Bacon. Currently, only 40 percent of adults and 33 percent of children with mental illnesses who rely on state-funded treatment receive it.

One in four adults in Florida's jails and prisons have a mental illness, a Partners' study showed. That number jumped to 50 percent of the population in juvenile detention facilities.

In Pasco, the sheriff's office spent more than \$146,000 in 2002 paying for medications for mentally ill prisoners. That is compared to the \$60,000 spent treating AIDS patients and \$15,800 treating heart conditions in the same period.

Mentally ill prisoners, typically charged with misdemeanor crimes, also cost taxpayers more overall because they are jailed longer.

"We are seeing people being held for months for trespassing or shoplifting because there is a question about whether they are competent to go to trial," said Paul Firmani, assistant public defender in west Pasco. "They shouldn't be punished simply because they have a mental illness. It's not a crime."

### Life On The Front Lines

Ostracized by society, many of Pasco County's mentally ill residents end up at Lisa Barbaras' front door. As founder and director of Holy Ground, the county's only homeless shelter, she's seen the numbers rise dramatically. Social acceptance at the shelter isn't guaranteed because other homeless residents are skeptical of their reliance on medications.

"I have people who come in here; they have nowhere else to go; they can't get their meds," she says. "I'm at the bottom of the totem pole. If I tell them they have to leave, that's pretty much it for them.

"I've had people throw themselves in front of cars on U.S. 19 because they were so desperate for help."

Finding help is difficult in Pasco, unless thoughts of suicide or homicide are involved. The same is true statewide, Bacon said, and that's why Partners is working with the Florida Sheriff's Association to expand the Baker Act criteria.

"There are a lot of people in Florida who have severe mental illnesses, but they don't appear dangerous," he said. "Even if they have a long history of being [committed], deputies can't do anything to help them, unless they are in danger of hurting someone or themselves."

The Harbor Behavioral Health Care Institute is ground zero for Pasco residents involuntarily committed for mental health evaluation under the Baker Act. They can be held for 72 hours, during which they meet with counselors and may be given medication.

"Do I have to slit my throat to get help at the Harbor?" asked Posanti, whose family sent her to Florida on a bus in July. She was homeless for two days before she arrived at Holy Ground.

"I went [to the Harbor] right after I got off the bus from New York," she said. "I said, 'I have a mental illness. I have been institutionalized off and on since I was 15. I am almost out of my medication. What should I do?'

"They told me they couldn't help me because I didn't qualify, gave me some samples and told me to go to [Holy Ground.]"

Similar scenarios play out around the clock, Barbaras said.

"I've had a guy here actually commit a crime so he could go back to the county jail and get his meds," she said. "Even if they do have their meds, they are in an altered state and may not remember to take them or take too many. I am not allowed to administer medications."

The Harbor doesn't have the financial capacity to help everyone, and who can be helped is governed by state criteria, says Director Irene Rickus. The gap between what the Harbor can provide and what's needed is growing.

"Our focus is how do we get you out and how do we keep this from happening again?" Rickus said. "We're a private nonprofit and the state subsidy doesn't pay

100 percent. The swelling needs in our community haven't been matched with an equal growth in funding. It's never enough."

### Societal Outcasts

Paranoia was building inside Posanti's mind as she sat on a bench at the shelter. Six days had passed since she took the last of the sample medications from the Harbor. She chain-smoked and glared at the other residents, mostly men who she said didn't value her "good heart."

"I'm a complete embarrassment and a burden to my family," she said through tears. "I struggle minute by minute with thoughts in my head. I have nobody in this whole world who loves me.

"I'm not wanted anywhere."

Barbaras tried to comfort her while they waited for the nightly prayer service. Posanti eventually joined the other shelter residents as they filed into a tiny, white clapboard church. Although, she was certain God "had stopped listening."

"You're not promised tomorrow," Barbaras told the crowd. "There's an urgency in your life to get it right today."

There has been an effort to get faith-based organizations involved with helping the homeless and mentally ill, Rickus said. Barbaras insists residents attend Bible study and church services in order to stay at the shelter.

"We constantly need to work with our community partners to find solutions," Rickus said.

Gary Diaz wasn't looking for a solution when he showed up at a New Port Richey church in July 2002. He simply wanted help.

"They gave me a can of potatoes and told me they couldn't do anything for someone with a mental illness," he said. "When I sat down outside to try to open the can and eat something, they told me to move along."

Diaz, 46, was fresh off a Greyhound bus from the Charlotte Correctional Center, where he had spent four years for a second-degree murder conviction in Pasco in 1992.

"When I got out, the prison made me take a bus to Holiday to my mother's house, but she passed in 1997. I had no family in Pasco County," Diaz said. "I was nervous. I didn't want to start drinking."

After being diagnosed with schizophrenia in the 1970s, Diaz found alcohol soothed the voices in his head. His marriage collapsed. In 1992, he stabbed his paralyzed brother, Arthur, to death, calling it a mercy killing. He was sentenced to 20 years in prison and served 10 1/2.

"I felt safe there. It was a controlled environment," he said. "I'm worried now. Scared. I need to try to get back on my feet or I'll end up in the ground."

When the church service ended, Diaz bummed a cigarette from the man sitting next to him. He smoked in silence and waited for Barbaras to order "lights out." Before she could give that order, a bus pulled up into the driveway. Its brakes hissed as the door swung open and Frank Mistretta got off. He carried a plastic bag containing his only belongings: a 30-day supply of medications to control schizophrenia. He had served most of a four-year sentence for attempted robbery and aggravated assault.

"I spoke to Lisa from prison," he said. "I wanted to come here when I got out of Zephyrhills Correctional."

The shelter was at capacity, but Barbaras didn't think twice.

"See what I mean?" she said. "There is nowhere else."

Mistretta, 36, was diagnosed with schizophrenia 10 years ago. He moved to Florida from New York, but couldn't afford to get treatment for his illness. He found what he thought was a cheaper alternative.

"I started smoking crack to quiet down the voices," he said. "One time, I got so high I hitchhiked to Hudson and ended up beating up this guy and trying to rob him."

### An Uncertain Future

Uncontrolled mental illness presents a risk to the public, law enforcement and those battling it, local police said.

Deputies and police in New Port Richey and Port Richey have reported encounters with people who have asked them to end their lives.

"A lot of the time, these people just need help," said Capt. Darryl Garman. "With the right medications, they might be just like you and me."

Restructuring the state's mental health system is the goal of Partners in Crisis, but it won't be easy, Bacon said.

"As the outlook for state revenues looks grimmer, so does the chance of getting the funding needed," he said. "The simple fact is: when you have people with untreated mental illnesses they usually are on the streets and will end up in jail.

"Whether it's state prison or a county jail, it's tax dollars that are paying for it."

Taxpayers in four Florida counties paid \$2 million last year to treat 124 people who ended up in crisis units and jails, Bacon said. That money would have paid for outpatient treatment for 473 people.

In Pasco, the goal is to reduce the time prisoners with mental illnesses spend awaiting trial, so they can move onto outpatient treatment. Prosecutors and public defenders have agreed to allow a sole psychologist to evaluate a prisoner's mental health, said Maryann Senderling, acute care services manager for the Harbor. The Harbor is in the process of hiring two psychologists as part of a county contract.

"This also might result in a cost savings for the county because it won't be paying for two evaluations," Senderling said.

It's a step in the right direction, but still doesn't address the gap that exists for mentally ill residents not in jail, Barbaras said.

"It's just going to keep getting worse unless something is done," she said.

Back at the shelter, Diaz sat alone in a corner, sprawled on a lawn chair, listening to music. Mistretta and Posanti lingered nearby, but neither made conversation.

Their thoughts were on the future.

"I've got to find someplace to live on my own," Posanti said. "Maybe a trailer where I can plant flowers outside and have a pet. But what if my neighbors don't like me? What if someone won't rent to me because of the way I look?"

Posanti boarded a bus for New York last fall after being turned down by three landlords. As of Friday, she was receiving mental health treatment in a New York state hospital.

"I'm doing real good, my doctors say," she said.

Diaz lives at the shelter and is searching for his only son, Douglas, whom he lost contact with while in prison. He worries about the future.

"If I could live somewhere where I got some help taking my meds," he said, "I would be willing to do almost anything. I am afraid to live alone."

On March 7, Barbaras called 911 and a deputy took Diaz to the Harbor, where he was held under the Baker Act.

Mistretta left the shelter a month after arriving. He had been living at a Salvation Army shelter in St. Petersburg, but left last week.

"I ?on't know whether I will stay out of trouble, but I hope so," he said. "If I can keep the voices quiet, I will."

#### (CHART) LEGISLATION PENDING

Bills are pending in the Florida Legislature and U.S. Congress that could change the way mental illness is handled by insurers, law enforcement and health care providers.

#### House Bill 1197

Supported by Florida Partners in Crisis and the Florida Sheriffs Association  
Revises the criteria for involuntary commitment up to 72 hours under the Baker Act to allow law enforcement, hospital workers and health providers to take a person's mental health history into consideration. The criteria now limits commitment based on whether someone is a danger to themselves or others.  
Gives judges the power to court-order outpatient treatment and require patients to take medications needed to control mental illness.

To voice opinions contact Pasco County's representatives:

Tom Anderson, R-Holiday, at (850) 488-8528, (727) 943-4760 or  
ANDERSON.TOM@myfloridahouse.com

Gus Bilirakis, R-Palm Harbor, at (850) 488-5580, (727) 669-1911 or  
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Johnnie Byrd, R-Plant City, at (850) 488-1450, (813) 752-5863 or  
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Heather Fiorentino, R-New Port Richey, at (850) 488-5522, (727) 816-1307 or  
Fiorentino.Heather@leg.state.fl.us

Ken Littlefield, R-Zephyrhills, at (850) 488-5744, (813) 558-5115 or  
Littlefield.Ken@leg.state.fl.us

David D. Russell Jr., R-Spring Hill, at (850) 488-6641, (352) 688-5004 or  
Russell.David@myfloridahouse.com

Congressional actions: Senate Bill 543 and House Bill 4066

Supported by mental health coalitions statewide

Similar measures already adopted by 34 states

Targets discriminatory practices among insurers by requiring mental illnesses to receive the same coverage as other diseases.

To voice opinions by contacting Pasco's congressional delegation contact:

Ginny Brown-Waite, R-Brooksville, at (202) 225-1002, (352) 799-8354, (352) 567-6707 or on the Internet at [www.house.gov/brown-waite](http://www.house.gov/brown-waite)

Michael Bilirakis, R-Palm Harbor, at (202) 225-5755, (727) 441-3721, (813) 996-7441 or on the Internet at [www.house.gov/bilirakis](http://www.house.gov/bilirakis)

Pasco taxpayers paid for more than \$375,000 worth of medications to treat prisoners with mental illnesses held in county jails. A county-sponsored subcommittee is implementing changes to reduce the time these prisoners spend in jail. Critics say more needs to be done to help the mentally ill who aren't incarcerated.

To voice opinions, contact:

Pasco-Pinellas State Attorney Bernie McCabe at (727) 464-6221

Pasco-Pinellas Public Defender Bob Dillinger at (727) 464-6516

Pasco Sheriff Bob White at (727) 844-7700

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