

ROCK COUNTY INVOLVEMENT IN COMPREHENSIVE MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

At the intersection of the criminal justice system and the mental health and AODA systems around the country, many challenges exist. Rock County is no exception. The economic state of the County is dire, with the closing of a key employer, GM, and consequently, the businesses supporting it. Unemployment benefits are ending for hundreds of these workers, perpetuating the downward spiral. Rock County has one of the highest unemployment rates in Wisconsin, with the City of Beloit having the highest rate (18.2%).¹ The demand for AODA and mental health services are increasing as residents are trying to deal with the new realities of their lives. Not surprisingly, the demand for services surpasses the current capacity of the County and other service providers to supply them. Furthermore, services may not be aligned with the population that most needs them or with their ability to pay. The Rock County Human Services Department provides limited mental health and AODA services to those who meet strict financial criteria. Unfortunately, with a dwindling budget and a staggering number of people requiring services, it can only address the needs of a small portion of the County's AODA and MI/COD population. This has led to a crush of individuals with mental illness and co-occurring mental illness and AODA disorders (MI/COD) overwhelming available resources and often ending up in the criminal justice system.

Needless to say, the Jail is often forced to house offenders whose unaddressed treatment needs have led to their incarceration. The Sheriff has noticed the significant need for mental health services and the County has begun to try and address the problem in the Jail. Prior to 2009, no mental health services were available to inmates. However, the Jail's new medical provider contract includes 20 hours/week of mental health social work time. From February-December 2009, 678 inmates received a social worker's mental health screening, a psychiatrist evaluated 110, and 446 were on psychotropic

¹ Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, March Unemployment Rates

medication. If 16% of jail populations have mental illness,² with an average daily Jail population of 598 (in 2009), roughly 96 mentally ill inmates were in custody on any given day.

The Sheriff's Annual Report notes that the Jail continues to "experience a significant increase in the number of special needs inmates requiring more staff resources." The suicide rate in jail is about four times greater than the rate of the general population.³ In 2008, the number of inmates with mental health issues and concerns remained problematic, including the identification of 167 suicidal inmates compared to 137 identified in 2005. (The suicide rate in the County as a whole increased 53% from 2008 to 2009 (from 15 to 23), with one inmate committing suicide in the Jail in 2009) Due to the lack of alternatives, most of those inmates remained in Jail rather than receiving proper mental health treatment. In turn, this increased the staff's workload having to conduct more than 21,610 safety/security checks.

Further, at least 75% of people with mental illness who are incarcerated have a COD.⁴ The number of arrests in Rock County in 2008 included 1,268 for operating while intoxicated (OWI), 2,465 for disorderly conduct, 1,115 for liquor law violations, and 938 for drug violations (652 for possession).⁵ In addition, there are many other inmates whose charges are not categorized as drug or alcohol related, but whose crimes are directly related to their substance abuse. Nationally, over a third of jail inmates who had a mental health problem said they used drugs at the time of the offense.⁶ Having the ability to address the needs of offenders with AODA problems before they become incarcerated or even at the time of arrest could have a significant impact on the Jail population and the community as a whole. There is a critical need for increased funding to provide treatment services in order to address the AODA and mental health needs identified in the County. By providing such services to those in need, it can

² Criminal Justice/Mental Health Consensus Project, <http://consensusproject.org>

³ *Jailing Communities*, 2008

⁴ Criminal Justice/Mental Health Consensus Project, <http://consensusproject.org>

⁵ Wisconsin Office of Justice Assistance Statistical Analysis: 2008 Arrests

⁶ BJA, *Mental Health Problems of Prison and Jail Inmates*, 2006

only improve the lives of the individuals, their families, and the County by allowing them to be productive members of society and free from the continuous cycling through the criminal justice system.

At present, there is a 7-month waiting list at the County operated counseling center. Thus, the Center cannot treat those inmates with mental health issues who are released from jail. Three additional masters level trained therapists would eliminate the waiting list. The estimated cost in salaries and benefits for those three positions is \$240,000.