

Mental Health and Criminal Justice

Mental illness is a serious problem in the criminal justice system. Many people struggling with a mental illness find themselves caught up in the criminal justice system. It is important that the crisis response by first responders, usually police, get people the help they need whether that is transport to the mental health service, de-escalation, or referral to another type of service. It is also important that all professionals who work with those at risk for mental health crisis in law enforcement, courts, mental health, health care, social services and corrections respond appropriately and effectively to those who are struggling with mental illness to help them avoid mental health crises.

The state should fund voluntary Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training. Criminal justice agencies around the nation have adopted CIT training with the support of national and local mental health organizations. In Minnesota CIT training has evolved to include an overview of mental illnesses and the mental health system; site visits to psychiatric facilities that accept transports from CIT officers and community mental health support facilities; daily scenario based role plays with trained professional mental health crisis role players, facilitated by active or retired criminal justice professionals trained to facilitate these sessions.

Jails have a higher number of persons with mental illness than prisons, and most do not have the staff or funding for discharge planning and follow-up. Discharge planning can address the question of how we can do a better job to lower recidivism rates. Lack of discharge planning puts a person back into the community without the tools to prevent them from returning, which compromises public safety, creates a cycle of recidivism that results in higher societal costs.

In Minnesota, the adult correctional bed capacity in county facilities has increased by 38% in the past nine years, from 5,341 to 7,397. The volume increase is straining the system, particularly given mental illness and the other health issues many inmates face. The criminal justice system has consistently underserved criminal court defendants with mental illness (Council of State Governments, 2002). When people with mental illness are arrested, the state can move them into treatment through diversion or a mental health court.

The Mental Health Legislative Network Supports:

- Fund Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training (HF 449/SF 318)
- Hire more prison discharge planners and fund pilot projects and develop standards for counties to conduct discharge planning from jails (HF 524/SF 317)
- Create standards and funding for mental health and drug courts
- Hire more public defenders
- Allow 911 operators to refer to mental health crisis teams (HF 448/SF 707)

For more information contact:
Mental Health Association of Minnesota at 612-331-6840; or
National Alliance on Mental Illness of Minnesota (NAMI-MN) at 651-645-2948.