

June 27, 2008

Untreated Mental Illness Costing Colorado's Corrections Systems Millions Each Year

*Multi-County Report Recommends More Community Based Services
To Save Public Resources*

Colorado's community mental health system can keep thousands of people out of the criminal justice system. That is the conclusion of a groundbreaking study commissioned by the Metro Area County Commissioners (MACC).

Statewide, approximately 17 percent of all inmates have a diagnosable mental illness. These individuals are consuming a significant share of the \$599 million the State of Colorado spent on corrections in 2007. Meanwhile, our cities and counties are spending millions more on people with mental illness who have fallen into our local courts and jails.

MACC commissioned the study, *Transforming Services for Persons with Mental Illness in Contact With the Criminal Justice System*, in 2008. Initial findings show that mentally ill inmates in the seven-county, Denver-metro area have an average jail stay of 121 days vs. 25 days for non-mentally ill inmates. They also have much higher rates of recidivism.

According to the report, it's more cost-effective for all stakeholders to intervene with these individuals in a community mental health setting before they encounter the law enforcement system. Those who do encounter jail and prison must be assisted with transition programs that provide access to the services they need to maintain their health and independence. Several such programs are in place across Colorado, but these services and others should be expanded, according to the report.

“Colorado is spending 8.8 percent of the state’s general fund on corrections,” said George DelGrosso, Executive Director of the Colorado Behavioral Healthcare Council. “Most other states spend 6.6 percent on average. This report provides important information that can be used by the state and other local communities who want to ensure the best use of limited public resources. Providing services and support to people with mental illness can save money and reduce recidivism”



Scott is a client of the John Eachon Reentry Program (JERP). JERP is one of many diversion and reentry programs that is successfully keeping inmates and prisoners out of jail when treatment is more cost-effective and more appropriate than incarceration. "I wouldn't have made it without JERP," he said. "Now, I hope to be a professional artist."

Additional recommendations in the report include:

- Improve coordination between local police and the Veterans Administration.
 - Develop behavioral management plans and coordinate agency strategy for persons who repeatedly utilize crisis services.
 - Open lines of communication to judges and the courts.
 - Develop affordable housing alternatives for persons with a criminal history.
 - Improve funding for community mental health services for the indigent population.
- "Decreasing criminal justice costs must go hand in hand with increasing treatment dollars."
- Improve resources for long-term care to provide increased levels of care.
 - Develop a good neighbor policy and cooperate across city and county lines to help individuals whether or not they are a resident of the city or county where an offense occurs.
 - Increase access to inpatient psychiatric beds.
 - Explore diverse funding options. "Many areas of Colorado's mental health system are underfunded, leaving major gaps in servicing indigent persons.
 - Create more diversion opportunities and expand Re-Entry Service Initiatives.
 - Involve consumers in future task force activity.
 - Streamline the Medicaid eligibility process and include local social service departments.
 - Explore a medication assistance program
 - Develop crisis triage centers.
 - Help improve the efficiency of the Social Security application process.
 - Identify and employ a standardized screening instrument.
 - Organize data collection efforts.
 - Prioritize action steps and gain momentum with quick solutions where possible.

Colorado has approximately 35,000 inmates in state prisons and county jails. According to Colorado Department of Corrections estimates, about 17 percent of the current inmate population

has a diagnosable mental health disorder and thousands more have mental health problems that could escalate without early intervention and proper treatment. Treating these individuals in the community costs about \$6,000 - \$8,000 per year, while incarcerating them costs up to \$60,000 per year and offers minimal, if any, remedial benefit.

Colorado's community mental health system has developed numerous programs and partnerships across the state to help divert minor offenders and to help reintegrate them into rural and urban settings upon release. Future editions of this newsletter will explore examples of these programs. For more information about these topics and others, please contact the Colorado Behavioral Healthcare Council at 303-832-7594:

- George DelGrosso, Executive Director, gdelgrosso@cbhc.org

- Doyle Forrestal, Director of Public Policy, dforrestal@cbhc.org

CBHC is a nonprofit membership organization that represents Colorado's statewide network of community behavioral healthcare providers (including 17 community mental health centers, two specialty clinics, and five behavioral health organizations). Members contract with the State of Colorado and work together to provide comprehensive, community-based behavioral and psychiatric services to more than 83,000 people across the state. CBHC members provide a network of skilled therapeutic and community resources to meet the mental health need of individuals and families. Thousands of people, once isolated and disabled by mental illness, are now leading productive and satisfying lives thanks to Colorado's award-winning community mental health system. For more information, visit www.cbhc.org.

Please forward this newsletter to your friends, family, and colleagues who might benefit from this information.