COUNTIES AND MENTAL HEALTH

WHAT COUNTIES ARE SAYING

Counties bear significant costs in providing mental health services to some of our most vulnerable residents. The state should fund a separate and sufficient number of inpatient forensic (including maximum security) and civil psychiatric hospital beds, community alternatives to hospitalization, children’s mental health crisis services, and transitional services at a level that will help divert the mentally ill from our jails, courts, and emergency rooms and ease the financial burden on local entities and their taxpayers.

BACKGROUND

Mental health and the criminal justice system are closely interrelated, with substance abuse adding even more complexity to the system.

The criminal justice system is among the largest cost drivers in the county budget and includes: law enforcement patrols (discretionary); the county jail (mandatory), the court system (mandatory); indigent defense (mandatory – underfunded); probation and other alternatives to incarceration (partially funded); and juvenile justice (partially funded); among other elements. Mental health is a broad-reaching county-wide issue that has significant impact on the adult justice system, juvenile justice and public education, as well as the county health care system.

Counties are mandated to provide certain constitutional minimum levels of care, including mental health care, while a person is incarcerated in the county jail. However, providing for certain services and care outside of incarceration is discretionary and depends on the amount of revenue available in the county general fund each fiscal year. Counties have the option of providing funds directly to the local mental health center or other assistive community programs when budgets allow. For this reason, it is not surprising to see the level of county funding to local mental health community centers fluctuate from year to year as county general funds are allocated.

The Texas Association of Counties’ 2016 County Expenditures Survey results reflect a steady statewide pattern of county general fund contributions to the support of local Mental Health Community Centers. There are 39 local centers providing services in all of Texas’ 254 counties to residents who have serious and persistent mental illnesses, intellectual and developmental disabilities or substance use disorders. These local centers are often the first contact for assistance when county law enforcement is dealing with individuals experiencing a mental health crisis.

The most recent numbers calculated by the Texas Council of Community Centers (the organization which represents the 39 local centers) demonstrates that counties have increased their support to local mental health agencies in recent years. Local taxing authorities, which include counties, cities, hospital districts and school districts, contributed a combined total of about $476 million to local mental health community centers between fiscal years 2009 and 2015. Of this amount, approximately $371 million (78 percent) came from county government.

ON THE HORIZON

In 2013, the Legislature appropriated an unprecedented $313 million in new funds to expand mental health services and programs, including the recognized need for veterans’ services.

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In accordance with legislation passed during the 83rd legislative session, the Department of State Health Services was required to collaborate with stakeholders to develop a statewide plan for the proper and separate allocation and funding of civil and forensic mental hospital beds, as well as address the best use of outpatient treatment and competency restoration services. The 84th Legislature directed the appointment of a Forensic Director to ensure the coordination and oversight of forensic services. Additionally, SB 1507 directed the state to convene an advisory panel to make recommendations for the coordination of forensic services. County officials are actively engaged in the development of this statewide plan which will be presented to the Legislature at the start of the 2017 legislative session.

These measures are significant and a step in the right direction. Ultimately, it is critical that funding for local mental health crisis services and indigent mental health rehabilitation be fully appropriated and the gaps in services be identified and addressed in order to slow the recycling of citizens through the criminal justice system. Sheriff’s deputies are normally the first on scene for mental health calls and stay involved throughout the process. Counties bear the brunt of the logistical and financial expenses in their jail budgets. However, community diversions and other programs are where the most timely, cost effective, beneficial, preventative and successful mental health services are delivered, and the state must fund them. ★

QUICK FACTS

• The Kaiser Family Foundation reports in 2013 Texas spent $40.65 in per capita mental health state funding - well below the national average of $119.62.
• Severe mental health and substance abuse disorders cost the Texas economy some $269 billion in total spending each year and 1.7 million permanent jobs.
• An average 24 percent of people in jails and prisons have a serious mental illness.
• The Texas Juvenile Justice Department reports that 54 percent of new admissions to state run facilities in fiscal year 2014 had a need for treatment by a licensed or specially trained provider for a mental health related issue.
• The average per day cost of community based services is $12 for adults and $13 for children, as compared to $401 for a State Hospital bed, $137 for a jail bed for an inmate with mental illness, and $986 for an emergency room visit.

Local Investment - Community Mental Health Centers

NOTE: Local Taxing Authority chart includes fund investments made over the course of 7 years (FY 2009 – FY 2015) to Community Centers. These figures include funds for both Mental Health and Intellectual Disability Services, but the majority of funds from local taxing authorities are directed to mental health services.