

Removing the Chronically Mentally Ill from the Criminal Justice System

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Between the late 1960s and the middle 1980s there was a drastic increase in the number of chronically mentally ill inmates in the Denver County Jail. These individuals were placed in the jail because they were involved in the commission of minor offenses.

In the early 1980s the jail had from thirty-five to forty-five chronically mentally ill individuals in custody. Many of these individuals were essentially doing a life sentence-in 60-, 90-, or 120-day increments. The jail staff was aware that these placements were inappropriate, but the mental health system refused to provide services for anyone who had pending criminal charges.

Planning a System for Dealing with the Chronically Mentally Ill

In 1986, the Denver Sheriff Department began to work with the Colorado Division of Mental Health and the Denver County courts to come up with a system that would remove the chronically mentally ill from the criminal justice system.

Several plans were discussed, including training patrol officers to

place seventy-two-hour mental health holds on all chronically mentally ill individuals. This idea was soon discarded because of the extensive training that would be required and because it seemed cumbersome for a law enforcement officer to place a seventy-two-hour mental health hold on an individual.

The sheriff's department decided it would be more logical to have chronically mentally ill individuals taken into the department's custody initially. A mechanism could then be established that would release these individuals from the criminal justice system and return them to the state case management system.

The department also created a new position for a psychiatric nurse. The psychiatric nurse reviews the cases of all chronically **mentally ill individuals arrested and recommends to the county court that charges against them be dropped.** Once the charges are dropped, the state case management system is notified, and the individual is returned to the mental health system.

Project Success

The program has been in effect for the past two and a half years. As of today, the Denver County Jail is

holding no chronically mentally ill inmates on misdemeanor charges.

The cooperation of the county court has been essential to the project. Another important factor has been our contact with the state mental health system and its case management system. Our psychiatric nurse has an excellent working relationship with the case management system, which makes it possible to return individuals to the mental health system very quickly.

The improper placement of chronically mentally ill individuals in the jail system in Denver has thus been solved because of a cooperative effort by the Denver County Courts, the Colorado Division of Mental Health, and the Denver Sheriff Department.

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For further information, contact John Simonet, Director of Corrections, Denver Sheriff Department, P.O. Box 1105, Denver, Colorado, 80201; telephone (303) 375-5650. ■