



Sheriff

JULY/AUGUST 2009 • VOLUME 61 • NUMBER 4

BEST PRACTICES THAT WORK

A **best practice** is the belief that there is a technique, method, process...that is more effective at delivering a particular outcome than any other technique, method, process. The idea is that with proper processes, checks, and testing, a desired outcome can be delivered with fewer problems and unforeseen complication source: www.wikipedia.org





A Recipe for Success

Community Mental Health and Criminal Justice

By Lt. Kathleen Carey, PIO, Newport News Sheriff's Office; Newport News, VA

A survey conducted October 16, 2007 revealed that 37% of the inmate population in Newport News, Virginia had a severe mental illness. The diagnoses included schizophrenia, major depression, and bipolar disorder. This one-day snapshot showed the cost to medicate these individuals topped a half-million dollars annually.

May 6, 2008, a mentally ill inmate violently attacked a deputy leaving him blind in one eye (covered in the Summer 2008 edition of "Sheriff").

On February 20, 2009 during a transportation run, a properly restrained woman kicked out the back window of a marked unit and proceeded to bend the window frame using her head as a battering ram.

These are only a few illustrations of a major dilemma. The dilemma is the mentally ill and the criminal justice system.

"Society will be judged on how we handle the least of us. I think if we were judged today, we would get an "F" on how we handle those with mental health issues," said Newport News Sheriff Gabriel A. Morgan.

Morgan sits on the Supreme Court of the Commonwealth of Virginia Commission on Mental Health Law Reform. They are looking for legislative solutions to address the needs of the mentally ill. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court established the commission long before the Virginia Tech tragedy (April 16, 2007). That massacre rocketed the matter into hyper speed. And things got personal for Sheriff Morgan when Corporal Brian Dodge was severely injured at the Newport News City Jail.

Also sitting on the Mental Health Law Reform Commission is Charles Hall, Executive Director of the

Community Services Board (CSB). It is there that the two men began to formulate a strong relationship built on similar philosophies. "We talked about how to avoid incarcerating someone whose only crime is mental illness," said Hall. "The two of us were exposed to professionals who think about this all the time. And we thought, 'How could we help out Newport News?'"

They directed their attention to the best practices of The Memphis Model, a program that has had measurable gains since it was established in 1988 following the shooting death of a mentally ill man in Memphis, Tennessee. The model uses a crisis intervention team that responds to the initial scene.

The City of Newport News began its own CIT (crisis intervention team) training last year. Police officers or sheriff's deputies now have a choice to make an arrest or take the person to a mental healthcare drop-off center. The drop-off center is crucial in encouraging officers to seek services rather than locking someone up. Taking a person to jail has often been a matter of convenience. Now this option is equally convenient but with a better result.

Sheriff Morgan said, "If we treat the underlying issue, we can free them from being part of the criminal justice system. We want to get them in treatment. Keep them compliant, and keep them out of jail."

Morgan did not want to stop at street level intervention. He wanted to bolster behind bars treatment of the mentally ill. To that end, he suggested that the CSB permanently assign staff to his jail. The Virginia Department of Mental Health awarded a \$304,000 on-going jail diversion grant to the CSB. The total package includes two full-time mental healthcare professionals whose offices are inside the jail, and eight hours a week of psychiatric time for diagnosis, treatment and medication management.



One of the full-time positions is that of a case manager. The other is for a peer specialist, “What we’ll call a boundary spanner,” explained Hall. “That is a professional position responsible for walking between systems that don’t normally walk together. Criminal justice. Mental health. In addition, the grant calls for the Pre-Trial Services staff to conduct a mental health assessment on every inmate as soon as they are booked into jail.”

These assessments will mean the Newport News Sheriff’s Office can accurately measure what percentage of the inmate population is mentally ill. (The aforesaid survey in 2007 was a one-time deal conducted by the state.) Current documentation is limited to identifying “who” the inmates are but less focused on identifying “what” psychiatric disorders they have.

The CSB and the Sheriff’s Office will be able to tell if the newly arrested person is currently registered as a Community Services Board client. If so, a lapse in treatment will be averted, improving the individual’s outcome. Hall explained, “To interrupt an episode of treatment that has been fairly successful, it then becomes more expensive to begin that treatment all over again. You must begin with another psychiatric intake.”

City leaders are also behind the jail diversion effort. Approximately \$51,000 in local funds has been allocated to augment the state grant.

Hall is confident the jail diversion program will work. “I promised the City Manager that

we would begin to see results within the first month and that I would more than deliver on the investment of City Council. I guaranteed we would triple the savings for the City by the number of people who would be diverted from jail.” It was a jaw dropping promise, continued Hall. “He’s not used to having human services agencies make a guarantee. I do not have any doubt that we’ll succeed (in saving money).”

The final piece to the plan is creating a Mental Health Docket. If a person’s charges prevent them from being taken to a mental healthcare drop-off center, and they must be arrested, the Sheriff, Magistrate and CSB could go before a judge on that special docket and ask that the person be placed in a carefully monitored treatment program. Criminal charges would be suspended if that person fulfilled the orders of the court. Only if they failed to comply would they be returned to jail.

The program has a strong assembly of partners. The Virginia General Assembly. The Governor of Virginia. The Newport News Sheriff’s Office. The Newport News Commonwealth Attorney. The Community Services Board. The Courts.

Sheriff Morgan believes, “We need to begin to have the political will to do the hard right.” 🌟

