

Key Informant Interview

Jim Hart, Chief Deputy Sheriff-Coroners Department

As part of the Santa Cruz County Mental Health Department's (CMH) needs assessment efforts for their strategic planning process, on November 21, 2014 the interviewer, Jerry Solomon, PhD, met with Jim Hart, Chief Deputy Sheriff to discuss his perception of the services currently being offered by CMH to the SMI*. In particular this interview explored the Sheriff's thoughts regarding the strengths and weakness of programs for SMI who have had encounters with the criminal justice system. Identified needs are highlighted.

County Jail

Over the years the jail has become a holding facility for people with serious mental illness. The jail is often over-capacity, and those incarcerated with SMI are a significant proportion of the inmate population. Managing and ensuring safety for the incarcerated SMI population is extremely time intensive for the jail staff and poses unique challenges compared to the general jail population.

Currently there is an effective system in place to identify those with a SMI at point of entry where all new inmates are assessed for suicide risk and are assigned to the most appropriate setting within the jail. Shortly after entering the jail a brief psychological and medical assessment is conducted with those identified as having a SMI so that necessary precautions and medications can be instituted.

The jail participates in the funding (50%) of James Russell, MSW, a CMH employee, who work with Patrol Staff. Unfortunately, only one position is currently funded and 24-hour coverage seven days a week is needed in the jail.

The jail currently has two units dedicated to housing SMI offenders. These are the most dangerous of units in the jail since it's difficult to predict dangerous aggressive inmate behavior. However, due to CHM's participation and excellent training received by staff in the last few years there have been very few attacks upon staff by SMI inmates.

Sheriff Hart states that he has an excellent relationship with the CMH director, Erik Riera and his staff, and that communication and collaboration is good. Every morning the mental health staff is available to review any psychological issues with new inmates and to assist staff with existing inmate needs.

The County jail has a group of repeat offenders who are SMI and create a regular demand upon the system. Some SMI inmates are released without being placed on probation. Consequently, they have no "eyes on them" to make sure that they follow through with court orders regarding treatment and medication compliance. They often return within a few weeks of discharge. There is an urgent need to address this problem.

Crisis Intervention

Sheriff Hart reports a strong working relationship with Pam Rogers, MA, CMH Program Manager, in coordinating law enforcements' response to those with SMI. Officers in the field are responding to an increasing number of crisis calls relating to the SMI on every shift.

Deputies are becoming more comfortable with their role of intervening and attempting to de-escalate situation involving those with SMI. The deputy's goal is to get ahead of the situation and avoid harm to the person or other citizens.

Sheriff Hart is supportive of the idea of deputies wearing body cams to avoid confused impressions of what happens when an intervention occurs. However many logistical and legal issues would need to be worked through before such technology could be used in the field.

Sheriff Hart was open and interested in the idea of consumers participating in a ride-along program so that the community can better understand the challenges officers regularly face during their work.

Watsonville

Issues related to those with SMI are similar to the county-at-large with the additional challenge of a language barrier when intervening with non-English speakers.

Youth

When called to the home of a youth in distress the goal is to de-escalate the situation and keep the child at home. They avoid hands on encounters as much as possible.

Elderly

Deputies have been trained and are aware of the different types of elder abuse. When called to the home of an elder the deputy attempts to establish a stable situation with the goal of maintaining the person at home.

LGBT

Sheriff Hart stated that neither he nor his deputies have any difficulty working with and protecting the LGBT community. Sheriff Hart reminded me that he, and many of his officers, was raised in Santa Cruz and that the LGBT community has long been a valued part of the fabric of the Santa Cruz.

Identified Needs

- The most significant gap in services is the absence of a sufficient number of beds for individuals in acute psychiatric crisis. This results in the jail becoming an inappropriate alternative for those best suited for services in a behavioral care setting.
- There is a significant shortage of transitional options for many released with SMI. Due to this shortfall the courts often request extensions of jail stays 30 to 180 days past the completion of an inmates release date.
- 24 hour staffing of a mental health staff person in the jail.
- Increase deputy staffing to lower ratios from 150 inmates to 1 staff to 65:1.

- Identification/creation of additional funding sources. Currently all funding for jail programs is local, with little or no assistance from the State.

*SMI in this text is either: "serious mental illness," or "seriously mentally ill."