

# THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

## New mental health stabilization facility could provide alternatives to jails, ERs

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By Rachel Alexander [rachela@spokesman.com](mailto:rachela@spokesman.com)(509) 459-5406

Police in Spokane may soon have a new place to take people with mental illnesses suspected of committing crimes besides jail or an overcrowded emergency room.

The Spokane Regional Law and Justice Council this week voted to move forward with a [plan to build a 16-bed mental health crisis stabilization facility](#) in Spokane County sometime in 2018.

It's intended to be a diversion program to keep people with mental illnesses out of jail. Instead, they would be referred to treatment and usually have charges dropped if they attend treatment, stay on prescribed medications, remain drug-free and don't commit new crimes.

Spokane police Chief Craig Meidl said the facility would give officers a better option for responding to people in crisis, which saves police time while also steering people toward treatment, not jail time.

"There are times where someone's committed a crime but the victim isn't interested in pursuing any charges, but you can't leave them there because things will just progress," Meidl said.

In those cases, an officer can take someone to jail, or into protective custody and transport them to Providence Sacred Heart Medical Center, where the wait for admission can be several hours. That wastes police time and does little to help the person in crisis, Meidl said.

With a stabilization facility, the officer would be able to drop someone off after looking at their criminal history and filling out a simple form. The officer would be back on the street within 10 minutes, Meidl said.

The proposal was developed by the Spokane Alliance, which worked with the law and justice council and Smart Justice Spokane over the past three years to make it a priority. Jim Dawson, a program director at Fuse Washington, worked on the proposal for the alliance and said it's garnered broad support from county commissioners, city council members, law enforcement, prosecutors and community members.

"It's definitely an example of people of all political stripes coming together to meet a real need in our community," he said.

Some people and groups are supportive of a stabilization facility, but have raised concerns about the program guidelines. In public comments submitted to the law and justice council, several people questioned what referring people to treatment would look like and worried that without case management, the program would be “setting people up to fail.”

To qualify, the person entering the facility would have to be charged with a misdemeanor or one of a few felonies: third-degree assault (a common charge for people who assault health care workers while receiving treatment) with approval from the victim or low-level property and drug crimes.

Domestic violence and sex crimes would not be eligible, and anyone with a prior felony conviction would also not be eligible.

Marieka McPhee, who leads support groups for people with mental illnesses and has schizoaffective disorder, said after reviewing the proposal she was concerned about the narrow scope.

“It’s good, but I think it will totally exclude a lot of people that have a prior record,” she said. Especially when people are young and first diagnosed with a mental illness, it’s common for people to be arrested multiple times, she said.

Dawson said the narrow scope was a concern for some groups involved in the proposal, but police officers felt the facility would fill quickly anyway with only 16 beds and wanted to avoid having it overrun.

Both the officer and the person in crisis would have to agree to use the stabilization facility. Meidl said officers would receive training on how to refer people.

In most cases, the charges leading to arrest would be dropped after completion of the program.

“There is prosecutor discretion, but the intent is that, in most cases, they would not face charges unless it was an exceptional circumstance,” Dawson said.

The projected cost estimates are \$2.4 million to renovate a building for the space, with about \$2.4 million to \$4 million per year in operating costs. Funding has not yet been identified, but Spokane County Criminal Justice Administrator Jacquie van Wormer said she’s pursuing state grant money earmarked for diverting people with mental illnesses from jails.

Much of the money to operate the facility would come from Medicaid reimbursements, which would drive the net operating costs down to about \$1 million a year, the plan says.