

## **Meeting the Needs of People with Mental Illnesses Leaving or Diverted from Jails through Supportive Housing**

With support from the Melville Charitable Trust, the Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center and its partners are helping states and counties to address one of the top obstacles to their efforts to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in jails: the high-rates of homelessness and housing instability among this population. The CSG Justice Center and partners are providing expertise and support around data analysis, program design, and financing strategies for supportive housing creation. We are helping select states and counties to: a) identify a priority population of people with mental illnesses who are at high risk of continued jail involvement, b) design a supportive housing program and delivery approach and unit creation plan, and c) align resources to scale supportive housing for their priority populations. Our work will result in greater cross-system collaboration and increased supportive housing opportunities as a diversion or re-entry option for people with behavioral health needs, ultimately resulting in reduced recidivism and improved outcomes for this population.

### **Background and need for the project**

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Our nation's jails have become warehouses for thousands of people with mental illnesses.<sup>1</sup> In fact, in every U.S. county that has a jail *and* a psychiatric facility, there are more seriously mentally ill people incarcerated than hospitalized.<sup>2</sup> This vulnerable population tends to stay in jail longer, and once released, often become or return to homelessness, only to wind up re-arrested and re-incarcerated. Communities across the country have made commitments to break this cycle and lower the number of people with mental illnesses in jails. However, leaders in these communities are finding that that efforts to divert people with mental illnesses from jails, or facilitate their connections to care upon release, are quickly frustrated by the lack of housing options, particularly for people with mental illnesses. In other words, in confronting the crisis of mental illnesses in jails, leaders face a new and vexing problem summed up in the question, "Divert to where?"

Supportive housing has been demonstrated as an effective intervention for this population. And, as jails seek to reduce their inmate population and lower recidivism, there is a critical window of opportunity to increase their use of supportive housing as a diversion and re-entry tool for people with mental illnesses. Yet, most communities lack enough supportive housing to serve all people with mental illnesses who are exiting or being diverted from jail. What's more, the size of the gap, between what housing is available and what is needed, is often not quantified. Compounding this challenge, people with criminal justice involvement are often not prioritized for the supportive housing that is available. A cross-system response, coordinating the efforts of law enforcement, jails, and the homeless and behavioral health systems, is needed to address this issue and capitalize on an unprecedented opportunity to change counties' response to people with mental illnesses.

### **Our Approach**

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Over two years, CSG Justice Center is assisting a select set of counties and states to implement supportive housing as a diversion and re-entry tool for persons with mental illness who come into

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/storage/documents/backgrounders/how%20many%20individuals%20with%20serious%20mental%20illness%20are%20in%20jails%20and%20prisons%20final.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/evidence-and-research/learn-more-about/3695>

contact with the criminal justice system and thereby, improving health outcomes and reducing recidivism. We are providing technical assistance (TA) to:

- 1) Assist counties to identify a priority population of individuals with mental illnesses (including those with co-occurring disorders) who are experiencing homelessness or severe housing instability, and who are at high-risk of jail (re-)incarceration;
- 2) Develop a comprehensive plan for meeting the supportive housing needs of this population, encompassing housing unit creation/placement targets, clearly mapped jail-to-housing referral pathways, and enhanced provider capacity; and
- 3) Increase alignment of state-level housing policies and resources to finance supportive housing focused on priority populations.

The scope of our technical assistance will include:

- Facilitating and guiding inter-agency data matches to identify priority populations and quantify the full scope of supportive housing needs;
- Building and strengthening cross-sector collaboration among criminal justice, behavioral health, and housing agencies;
- Refining program models, designing referral pathways that connect jail diversion and reentry to housing, and selecting and strengthening providers; and
- Defining and measuring success; and
- Identifying and aligning resources to finance units to address supportive housing needs.

Counties and states will emerge from the effort with an identified priority population for supportive housing, a multi-year plan for meeting the need among this identified population, and greater alignment of partners and resources to meet this need.

### **Participating Communities**

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CSG Justice Center has identified Ohio as a priority state for the project. CSG Justice Center will spend a year working with a cohort of four Ohio counties to understand and implement best practices, foster interagency partnerships, use existing data to size the housing need, and develop a financing strategy to create additional supportive housing. CSG Justice Center is also assisting Santa Clara County, California with reviewing and improving implementation of its new supportive housing initiative for jail-involved people with mental illnesses. We are also exploring opportunities to provide this assistance in California, Connecticut, Michigan, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. The scope of our assistance in each state will be customized based on individual state and county needs and resources.

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