



Polk County Jail
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October 8, 2009

Ro Foege, Chairman
Mental Health Institute Task Force
2277 Iowa Avenue
Independence, IA 50644

Chairman Foege;

The Polk County Sheriff's Office in Des Moines, Iowa would like the opportunity to express serious concerns over the recent discussions to close one of the four mental health institutes in the state of Iowa. We have reviewed the documentation prepared by the Iowa Department of Human Services, *Overview of the State Mental Health Institutes*, published on August 24th, 2009. Although we understand the enormous burden of exercising economic responsibility and recognize cuts will have to be made; the proposed closing of one of the limited number of mental health institutes in our state will undoubtedly, in our opinion, deny or seriously delay specialized mental health care and substance abuse treatment to those who need it and create additional fiscal responsibilities to county entities.

We currently have numerous programs in place to assist those inmates with mental illness to include a Mental Health Jail Diversion Program in which eligible inmates with severe and persistent mental illness have the opportunity to be removed from the jail setting. A specific case plan is created by a Diversion Plan Team consisting of a few of the following: probation officers, pre-trial release staff, jail classification officers, Polk County Health Services, attorneys, intensive case managers and a judge.

We contract with a health care provider for the inmates, Prison Health Systems, which includes staffing for inmates with mental health and substance abuse issues. We also utilize substance abuse counselors from Employee & Family Resources who interview, evaluate, and refer inmates to treatment programs as an alternative to jail. An assessment of need and ability to participate in substance abuse and assistive programs is compiled and a recommendation is made based on each inmate's specific situation.

Deputies assigned to our mental health unit have completed 179 mental commitments and 100 substance abuse commitments from January 1, 2009 to August 20, 2009. The average runs approximately 350 to 400 commitments annually.

So far this year from the jail, we have sent 12 inmates to Cherokee on judicial mental health orders. Based on our inmate population, this is roughly 1.5 inmates per month. The range in wait time averages one month. We also average 6 inmates on a weekly basis, 24 on a monthly basis and 288 on an annual basis at the Mount Pleasant facility. The average wait time for Mt. Pleasant is about 2 weeks and we currently have 15 beds reserved just for Polk County inmates. We can only exceed 15 beds if space is available.

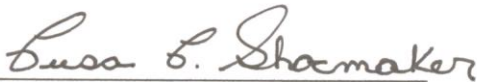
Your own statistics tell us that by 2002, roughly 42% of the beds at Mental Health Institutes across the state have been closed. As a result of those closures, waiting lists for the remaining facilities are now routine. We are left to theorize that further closings will lead to extreme extended waiting periods. We know these unfortunate citizens who need assistance, are waiting in the last place they should be waiting...in our jails.

Jails and incarceration are not the answer to mental health issues. Not only because the counties bear the cost of housing these citizens until a bed is available, but we have continually advocated for the appropriate treatment for those with mental illness and substance abuse. The treatment programs available in Independence, Cherokee, Clarinda and Mount Pleasant assist in protecting the public from violent criminal acts and lowering their propensity to re-offend.

We ask that you seriously consider the ramifications from all perspectives before a final decision is made to close any further mental health facilities.

Thank you for your time and consideration.


Bill McCarthy
Polk County Sheriff


Leesa L. Shoemaker
Jail Division Chief

CC: CJCC – Polk County Criminal Justice Coordinating Council
Ron Olson, Polk County Administrator
Angela Connolly, Chair - Polk County Board of Supervisors
Sharon Chambers, Coordinator - Prison Health Systems Mental Health