

## Report Highlights

### Lessons Learned From Three Mental Health Diversion and Post-Release Programs

Mental health diversion programs divert people with mental illness from the criminal justice system into communities where they can obtain community-based mental health treatment services. Senate Resolution 2003-125 directed the LB&FC, together with the staff at the Council of State Governments, to review evaluation reports of two such programs to assess the viability and appropriateness of encouraging similar programs through the Commonwealth.<sup>1</sup>

- **Forensic Diversion and Diversion Simulation Model.** Chester County did a study to estimate the cost effectiveness of its planned MH diversion program. The study found:
  - *The amount of cost savings depends on who is diverted.* The criminal justice system is more likely to save (avoid) costs when the program includes more severe offenses. A program that included all misdemeanors and summary offenses as well as Felony 3 offenses was estimated to result in 6 diversions/month, saving the county \$87,436 over a 2-year period.
  - *The projected outcomes can only be achieved if the appropriate services are delivered.* One major barrier to the success of jail diversion programs nationally has been the inability to deliver appropriate MH and substance abuse services to diverted individuals.
  - *Stable housing is essential to achieving positive outcomes.* Because of the critical role housing plays in expected outcomes, the findings would have to be adjusted if adequate housing could not be found.
- **Justice, Treatment, and Cost: An Evaluation of the Fiscal Impact of Allegheny County Mental Health Court.** This 2007 RAND study found:
  - *Reduced jail expenditure<sup>2</sup> offset the cost of linking individuals to treatment in the community.* In the first year after entering the MHC program, participant costs more than offset the savings generated by reduced jail expenditures. In the second year, however, the drop in jail costs more than offset the treatment costs, suggesting that the MHC

program may help decrease total taxpayer costs over time.

- *The diversion program shifts costs to the state and federal government.* Even if there are no overall savings, the county can achieve savings because jail services are funded mostly with county resources, whereas treatment services are funded primarily with state and federal Medicaid funds.
- *The MHC program relies on high-quality treatment services being available in the community.* Communities considering a diversion program need to ensure that sufficient resources exist to provide high-quality mental health and substance abuse treatment services.
- *RAND found no evidence that the public safety was jeopardized by the MHC program.* More recently, however, felons with more serious criminal histories have been admitted to the program, raising some concerns about sufficient supervision staffing.

**Recommendations:** Given the mixed results of these studies, we recommend that if a county MH diversion grant program is established, the participating counties be required to:

1. *Demonstrate significant potential to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in local jails.*
2. *Involve local criminal justice advisory boards and mental health entities.*
3. *Monitor (and measure) program impact.*
4. *Use existing government agencies, such as the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD), to administer the grant program and select grantees.*

<sup>1</sup> A third program cited in the resolution was a post-release program for offenders who are eligible for either parole or early release. This program is discussed in the report, but is not included in this Report Highlights.

<sup>2</sup> As in the Chester County study, the jail savings estimates are based on both fixed and variable costs.