New jail program shows success in battling recidivism

By Tony Biasotti Special to The Star

Monday, June 13, 2011

Two of the most commonly cited flaws in America's criminal justice system are its treatment of the mentally ill and the staggering rate at which released inmates wind up back in jail.

A new Ventura County program is tackling both at once, and the early results appear promising.

The Ventura County Sheriff's Department's Discharge Planning Program offers counseling, training, psychiatric care and other services to people before and after they're released from the county's jails. It debuted in August with a small group of inmates participating, and the people running the program have released the findings of an in-depth study.

Seventeen of the 57 participants were classified as psychiatric inmates, meaning they have a "severe and persistent" mental illness. The other 40 were drawn from inmates involved in some sort of educational program, such as a high school equivalency course.

Since the program started, 17 participants — 30 percent — had been arrested again. It's a small sample, but that's far below the one-year recidivism rate of 50 percent to 70 percent cited in various state and national studies.

The program is now available to any inmate who wants to join. Inmates are screened when they're arrested to gauge what help they might need upon release, and they're asked to start the program at least six weeks before they get out of jail.

Sheriff's Cmdr. Linda Oksner, who runs the jails and oversees the release program, said she's optimistic the early results can be replicated on a larger scale. The key, she said, is that the program will be offered only to people who volunteer for it.

"We believe that if someone wants the help, they're in a much better position to benefit from it," she said.

The boots on the ground belong to Abigail Honorico, a program administrator with the Ventura County Sheriff's Department, and Heather Johnson, a mental health associate with Ventura County Behavioral Health. With the help of various nonprofits and government agencies, they can connect the inmates with job training programs, medications and prescriptions, treatment for addiction and mental illness, and places they can live when they get out.
That's in contrast to the typical practice of giving inmates pamphlets when they leave jail that tell them how to find those services.

"It's not that the old model will ever go away, because many of them will never want to be part of the program," Honorico said. "We need to have the old model available for those who are the self-help kind of people, and for those who do need more help and are ready to ask for help, we make that available to them."

Ventura County's effort is modeled after a discharge program in Florida. Other counties, including Santa Barbara, have similar programs.

Johnson and Honorico discussed their first 10 months of work with the Ventura County Board of Supervisors last Tuesday.

Supervisor Linda Parks called the recidivism rates "remarkable."

"It's nice to see that there is a way to deal with this and do it successfully," she said. "It's pretty thrilling to see that."

The program has been run without any additional funding, with everything so far coming from the existing jail budget. Oksner said she thinks government or private grants can be obtained if the program gets big enough to require more funding.

For now, the program will continue with just two employees.

"It's just Heather and I," Honorico said with a laugh. "We're overworked and underpaid."

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