

LIFE

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Clermont team learns effort to reduce number mentally ill in jail

Ohio has joined a growing national effort to reduce the number of persons with mental illness who cycle through county jails.

State and county officials convened in Columbus to learn how the national Stepping Up Initiative is bringing local criminal justice and behavioral health systems together to improve public safety, access to services, and treatment outcomes.

The Stepping Up Initiative was launched in May 2015 as a partnership of The Council of State Governments Justice Center, The National Association of Counties, and The American Psychiatric Association Foundation. The initiative is designed to rally national, state and local leaders around the goal of reducing the number of people with mental illnesses and substance use disorders in jail.

"Ohio has been a leader in establishing mental health and veterans courts, developing Crisis Intervention Teams in law enforcement, and other efforts to reform the criminal justice system for persons with mental illness," said retired Ohio Supreme Court Justice Evelyn Lundberg Stratton, who will serve as project director of the Ohio Stepping Up Initiative. "Once again, we are proud to be a leader in a national effort. Our work through the Stepping Up Initiative will improve public safety, break the cycle of jail for persons with mental illness, and increase their access to treatment."

Jail administrators, law enforcement officials, elected officials, treatment providers and other stakeholders from 23 Ohio counties, including Clermont County, attended the Ohio Stepping Up Summit where they heard from Stratton and several other state and national experts, including Attorney General Mike DeWine, Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services Director Tracy Plouck and Dr. Fred Osher, director of Health Systems and Services Policy at the CSG Justice Center.

At the summit, county teams attended



PHOTOS BY GATHLEEN WILLIAMS
Denny Moell, assistant director of crisis services, Child Focus; Joe Ellison, chief probation officer, Clermont County Municipal Court; Karen Scherra, executive director, Clermont County Mental Health & Recovery Board, and Chief Deputy Chris Willis, Clermont County Jail administrator.

working sessions framed by six questions related to the commitment of their local leadership, their use of screening and assessments, the existing level of baseline data in their county, the degree to which they track progress, and other considerations. As participants, Stepping Up counties receive access to an on-line resources toolkit to assist with their efforts, including a series of webinars, planning tools, resources, technical assistance and distance-learning opportunities.

"Clermont County has long been a leader in collaboration, involving the Mental Health and Recovery Board,

treatment providers, the courts, judges and probation departments, the jail, law enforcement and county government," MHR Board Executive Director Karen Scherra said. "The Stepping Up Initiative is another mechanism to provide our county with ideas and practices we can use to improve our current systems."

Each year, an estimated 2 million people with serious mental illnesses are admitted to jails across the nation — a rate that's three to six times higher than that of the general public. Nearly three-quarters of these adults also have drug and alcohol use problems. Once incarcerated, individuals with mental illnesses tend to

stay longer in jail and upon release are at a higher risk of returning to incarceration than those without these illnesses.

"The number of people with mental illnesses in U.S. jails has reached a crisis level," said OhioMHAS Director Plouck, who also serves on the CSG Justice Center's national board of directors. "The vast majority of these individuals who have committed minor offenses can be safely treated, and if necessary, placed under community supervision, instead of being put behind bars. We're excited to join this effort and look forward to working with our partners at all levels to help counties achieve their goals."



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