

# Mental Illness Incarceration Reform

- Judicial Equality for Mental Illness (JEMI), League of Women Voters (LWV), Mental Health America, and the Citizens First Congress (CFC) are working on incarceration reform legislation dealing with persons with mental illness.
- With Governor Hutchinson's support, Arkansas has the opportunity to take the first step in correcting the problem of incarcerating non-violent persons when they are in a mental health crisis. Let his office know this should be part of his prison reform package. Call the governor's office at 501-682-2345 to ask for support of mental health crisis intervention services programs as part of the reform.
- Instead of continuing to add to prison overcrowding, we need to provide police with options other than expensive emergency rooms or jail.
- We would like to resolve this problem more compassionately, at much lower cost, and in a way that people with mental illness can receive proper treatment.
- Senator Jon Woods, Representative David Whitaker and Senator Uvalde Lindsey developed a bill that includes crisis centers and which the Governor has taken for his larger legislation.
- A new revenue stream is needed within our communities for mental health services.
- There are three primary reasons why we must begin reducing this crisis:
  - Community based mental health services cost far less than incarceration and are more effective. Jailing is twice as expensive as mental health treatment and is three times more expensive than substance abuse care.
  - We have an ethical responsibility to compassionately address individuals' mental health needs. The problem is increasing as soldiers with PTSD return to their communities.
  - Arkansas must fulfill its constitutionally mandated obligation to protect the civil and constitutional rights of those suffering from mental illness (Article 19:19): "It shall be the duty of the General Assembly to provide by law for the support of institutions for the treatment of the insane."
- Why are so many people who have a mental illness in jail?
  - Unlike a person with a physically critical condition, there is no treatment safety net for the person in a mentally fragile state.
  - The responsibility for care thus inadvertently falls on our jails since Arkansas law enforcement does not have a readily available mental health system to care for persons with mental illness.
  - Jail can keep violence at bay. However, it is unequipped to treat mental illness.

- The Bad News:
  - No single community in Arkansas has the full range of law enforcement and mental health resources necessary for best cost saving practices, public safety and fair treatment of persons experiencing mental illness.
  
- The Good News:
  - Some states have been financially successful in implementing new programs to reduce costs and improve outcomes for non-violent persons experiencing mental illness.
    - San Antonio, Texas has saved \$50 million over the past 5 years after implementing a 24/7/365 Crisis Center and in-depth police officer training. Their reasoning: to “provide mental health services and supports on the front end rather than pay for jail beds and prison time.” The Center is open to all in the community.
    - Missouri has a system of crisis centers and health home follow-up services that have significantly reduced Medicaid costs.
    - In the past 12 years Oklahoma has implemented crisis centers, mental health courts and systems of care, saving millions and producing a healthier population.
  
- The Best News:
  - A Coalition of law enforcement, mental health professionals, families and other advocates are united in proposing an initial Demonstration Crisis Center to the Arkansas Legislature to include a:
    - 24/7 Mobile Psychiatric Crisis Team
    - 24/7 Psychiatric Crisis Assessment Center with overnight capacity
    - 16 bed Medicaid eligible short-term facility (3 to 5 days).

## JEMI Background

- JEMI was formed in 2012 after a woman, known to many in the community, had been held in the Benton County jail for 9 months waiting for an evaluation at the Arkansas State Hospital.
- She died in jail from undiagnosed and untreated pancreatic cancer. Because of her schizophrenia she was unable to communicate effectively about her pain with jail personnel.
- There were no mental health professionals whose job it was to visit her and provide intervention on her behalf.
- As a result of this incident the judicial community, the mental health community, and Washington and Benton County jails have come together to change the system.