

MENTAL HEALTH

Many individuals with mental illness also suffer from substance abuse, homelessness, and engage in criminal behavior. Unfortunately, as with mental health treatment, resources for substance abuse treatment and assistance with homelessness have not kept pace with the demand. When people experience some combination of mental illness, substance abuse, and homelessness break the law, they are typically arrested. This has resulted in a growing population of inmates with mental illness placing tremendous pressure on county jails.

In 2005, the number of mentally ill inmates in jails and prisons in the United States was more than 1.25 million.ⁱ Fifty-six percent of inmates in state prisons, 64% of inmates in local jails, and 45% of inmates in federal prisons reported having had a mental health problem within the previous 12 months.ⁱⁱ

When people with mental illness are arrested, especially those who are homeless, it is often for minor offenses such as trespassing, public urination, open container violations, or disorderly conduct. Even if they are experiencing a mental health crisis, jail is sometimes the only available place to take them. Some may stay in jail for months, waiting for a hospital bed after being deemed incompetent to stand trial.

The inmates who come to the county jail with severe mental illness are the most dangerous people the detention officers will deal with. Most detention officers will admit that they would rather take the most hardened criminal over a severely mentally ill individual who is in jail for a minor misdemeanor.

Incarceration is not a cure for mental illness and presents an ongoing public safety challenge, yet it is often the only option law enforcement has at the time of arrest. This “easy button” approach to dealing with the mental health challenges in our community—which is the reality for most sheriffs’ offices in the United States—is a huge waste of resources, does little to help people with mental illness, and shifts a huge amount of liability to law enforcement. Because, it takes specially trained staff to handle and treat people with serious mental illness.

Upon being elected Wake County Sheriff, I already understand the budget constraints and increasing demands on our resources, as well as the enormous liability my office faces from our population of mentally ill inmates. Some of the investments I intend to make will include increasing the hours of coverage for a mental health counselor; making telepsychiatry available to those in need; and having a medicated assisted treatment program.

If elected Sheriff of Wake County, I will also change our intake processing to include screening for mental illness and suicidal ideation. I will implement a new inmate classification system, which includes additional levels of screening for mental illness and specific housing options for those deemed to have a serious mental illness. I will also increase inmate program offerings to include anger management and employment literacy skills, to have inmates learn coping skills and become employable while in custody to reduce recidivism.

Diversion strategies will also be developed that will keep some individuals accused of low-level, non-violent offenses out of the jail altogether and instead place them in community-based programs that are better positioned to provide the type of treatment services that these individuals need.

Providing mental health services traditionally has not been a core mission of the sheriff's office, because the jail has custody of most inmates for only a relatively short time it does not have an opportunity to make a lasting impact. However, I realize that for the safety of inmates, jail staff members, and the community—As Sheriff, I have a responsibility for assisting persons with mental illness that cannot be shirked. I have to move from a traditional mindset of temporarily warehousing large numbers of individuals, to one that accepts and embraces the role of treatment provider and public safety guardian.

ⁱ "Mental Health Problems of Prison and Jail Inmates." Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report (NCJ 213600). September 2006. <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/mhppji.pdf>.

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