

Mo. pairs MH, law enforcement to avert crises, improve care

In an effort to save valuable state and local resources that would otherwise be spent on unnecessary jail, prison and hospital stays, and to improve behavioral health outcomes, Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon has coordinated liaison services throughout the state as one of his strategic initiatives to identify and treat Missourians with severe mental illness before they reach a crisis point.

The Community Mental Health Liaisons (CMHLs) represent counselors and social workers who are funded by the Department of Mental Health and employed by the state's community mental health centers (CMHCs). The governor's initiative places the CMHLs at each of the 30 CMHCs across Missouri to help coordinate services for individuals with complex behavioral health needs.

The program, which began in November 2013, also involves law enforcement referrals. Law enforcement or court personnel make referrals to the CMHLs, who then follow up within 30 days to help improve linkage between hospitals and inpatient and outpatient treatment.

"The program assists law enforcement and courts with individuals who come into contact with the criminal justice system, so the majority of referrals are of individuals who are not yet incarcerated," Debra Walker, spokesperson for the Missouri Department of Mental Health, told *MHW*. "It is hoped that early involvement by the community mental health liaisons can divert unnecessary incarceration."

The CMHLs may not be able to solve all problems related to access to care for people with mental illness and substance use disorders, according to a statement from Department of Mental Health officials.

They will, however, work to make the mental health system better by providing training, consultation and coordination of existing access crisis intervention and community treatment services, officials said.

"Having the endorsement and support of Governor Jay Nixon was essential to the success of this project," Walker added, "Undertaking a coordinated and comprehensive initial introduction of this program was essential — meetings were held with the directors of the police and sheriffs departments followed by a letter of explanation to every police chief and sheriff in Missouri. Letters were also sent to the court in each

until government gets a hand on the fact that a chemical imbalance is an illness the same as a broken arm is, it will stay that way."

Role of the CMHLs

Some examples of the role of the CMHLs include:

- Assist law enforcement and the courts in locating inpatient psychiatric beds for court-ordered involuntary detentions.
- Explore opportunities for use of outpatient commitments.
- Collaborate with local partners in specialty/diversion courts dealing with behavioral health issues.
- Identify and address structural barriers, miscommunications and consistent patterns that reduce access to services.
- Consult with case managers to improve coordination of care for people with repeat involvement.

Training, building relationships

The CMHLs provide training for law enforcement on various topics, including understanding mental health and substance use disorders, recognizing warning signs of suicide and self-harm, responding to individuals in crisis, and recognizing trauma, stress, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

"The overarching goal of this program is to build better relationships between law enforcement, the courts and community mental health centers to link people with better services and better care and to keep them out of jail," Christine Patterson, Ph.D., community liaison coordinator for the Missouri Coalition for Community Behavioral Healthcare (formerly the Missouri Coalition of Community Mental Health Centers), told *MHW*.

Patterson added, "We're finding that the police have a lot of involve-

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county in Missouri."

While data are being collected, it is too soon for analysis, said Walker. To date, there have been more than 5,000 contacts between CMHLs, law enforcement and the court, she said.

An article in the July 8 *Missourian* indicated that the mental health law enforcement partnership is considered a "bonus" for the state. The initiative contains two laudable goals: decreasing societal costs and treating individual mental health disorders, according to the article.

"Jail has become a repository for the mentally ill in most cases," said Cole County Sheriff Greg White, according to the *Missourian*. "And

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ment with people with mental health and substance abuse issues."

"The CMHLs have become the face of the [mental health] agency,"

she said. Law enforcement officials like having one central person to talk to at the CMHCs, Patterson said. The initiative, noted Patterson, is unique to the state and perhaps the

country. "We do not know of any other similar program in other states," she said. "The courts and law enforcement do like having these resources available." •

Settlement reached for Conn. nursing home residents with MI

A Connecticut federal judge on July 2 gave final approval to a lawsuit settlement that calls for nursing home officials to end the practice of housing residents with mental illness in nursing homes and to provide those who are eligible with community services in the most integrated settings with appropriate supports.

U.S. District Judge Alvin Thompson's approval of the settlement ended a dispute that began when local and national advocacy groups filed a federal lawsuit on Feb. 6, 2006, alleging that more than 200 people with mental illness were needlessly isolated, segregated and

illness can live in their own homes, with support, instead of institutions like nursing homes," Lewis Bossing of the Bazelon Center said in a statement. "For most people with mental illness, living in your own home, just like everyone else, is what the law requires — and where we see the best outcomes."

According to the settlement, 130 nursing home residents currently housed in two Connecticut nursing homes are to live in community residences and receive appropriate support services. The settlement sets a precedent in the state of Connecticut, Nancy B. Alisberg, managing at-

New Haven-based nursing home. The other residents were placed in other nursing homes or in the community, she explained. "We weren't involved; it had nothing to do with the case," she said.

Transition process

The state and certain of its agencies have agreed that people with mental illnesses residing at Chelsea Place Care Center in Hartford and Touchpoints in Manchester will be given the opportunity to transition to community-based homes through a variety of federal and state funded programs within 18 months, according to an OPA statement.

In addition, the settlement provides that persons admitted to the nursing homes during the four-year term of the agreement will be evaluated for transition to community-based housing within one year of admission to the home.

The lawsuit took years to resolve, said Alisberg, due to procedural issues. The defendants had filed a motion to dismiss on at least two occasions, and the plaintiffs subsequently refiled the case, she said. "Getting the motion to dismiss [by the plaintiffs] took a number of years to work its way through," Alisberg said. The subsequent discovery processes also took some time, she said.

Services for the former nursing home residents will include peer support, mobile crisis services, case management and employment assistance. For individuals with a mental illness who move into a nursing home after the settlement, the state will then have up to a year to provide them with community placement if they want it and if they are eligible, Alisberg said. •

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Nancy B. Alisberg

institutionalized in three Connecticut nursing homes (see *MHW*, Feb. 13, 2006).

The Connecticut Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities (OPA), along with the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, filed the federal lawsuit alleging that the state was in violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the *Olmstead v. L.C.* Supreme Court decision. The New York City-based law firm Stroock & Stroock & Lavan LLP also served as counsel.

"Almost all people with mental

torney at OPA, told *MHW*.

The settlement is similar to agreements in other states, most notably in New York and Illinois, she said. "We are very pleased that people with a mental illness in nursing homes who are able to move into the community with sufficient supports are going to have the opportunity to do that," said Alisberg.

When the lawsuit was initially filed eight years ago, more than 200 people were represented. Alisberg explained that the number of residents represented is now smaller due to the subsequent closing of a