

2013 Nomination for the Northeast Region – Union County

Created in 2006 by former President Judge Harold Woelfel, the Union County CJAB is setting the pace in innovative and collaborate approaches to address county needs. Judge Woelfel, the driving force behind the creation of the Union County CJAB, decided to form the advisory board as result of meetings with Union County's Drug and Alcohol Prevention-Community Action Team (DAP-CAT). DAP-CAT was made up of various members of the community and grew out of a shared concern over increased use of controlled substances throughout Central Susquehanna Valley.

As the Union County CJAB developed, the issue of overcrowding at the prison quickly became a CJAB priority. The Union County Prison has 35 beds and is outdated and unable to house the average daily inmate population of 70 offenders. They are lacking facilities for programming such as group counseling, instructional classes, and re-entry services. Additionally, they do not have female accommodations, although approximately 11 females can be sentenced to prison at any given time. As a result, the Union County Commissioners were forced to budget \$1 million annually to pay for the out-of-county housing of inmates, with most offenders being housed in neighboring Snyder County.

In an effort to address the prison overcrowding, the CJAB formed a subcommittee to explore viable solutions the county could implement. In June 2007, the subcommittee toured the then newly constructed Franklin County Prison and Day Reporting Center (DRC). After the visit, the subcommittee agreed that a DRC was a viable option for addressing Union County's prison overcrowding and would also have a positive impact on the recidivism rates among probationers and parolees.

Moving ahead with the DRC initiative, former Union County Commissioner William Haas inquired about the possible county acquisition of a US Army Reserve Center, located in Lewisburg, that was scheduled to close. Commissioner Haas envisioned the facility as the main DRC building. Federal authorities agreed to donate the building and in 2012, Union County acquired the facility.

Commissioner Haas has since resigned from his position as County Commissioner; however, the present Board of Commissioners continued to demonstrate the same enthusiasm and opened a DRC in 2012, partially funded through PCCD.

The Union County CJAB is one of two CJABs in the Northeast region that recognized the need for community partnerships and participation by non-criminal justice entities if they were going to be successful in their prison overcrowding and subsequent re-entry efforts. As a result, the Union County CJAB invited the Union County Housing Authority (UCHA) to actively participate in CJAB planning efforts. In addition, all three County Commissioner are actively involved with the CJAB, and one Commissioner is specifically appointed to work closely with the criminal justice partners. The Board of Commissioners are receptive to innovative strategies

that have the potential to save the county and citizens tax dollars, while supporting offenders reintegrating into the community.

As a result of their collaboration and unique CJAB composition, Union County was well positioned to compete for and receive federal JAG funds, made available from a joint funding opportunity by PCCD and the Department of Public Welfare, Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (DPW/OMHSAS), for the development of a housing initiative for justice-involved individuals with mental illness. Union County was awarded funds to build upon the partnership with the UCHA and enhance their Justice Bridge Housing Program (JBHP).

The grant award from PCCD in the amount of \$71,896, provides supportive housing for a projected six participants diagnosed with serious mental illness and/or substance abuse disorder that are justice involved. JBHP adopted a current model used by UCHA that includes a prescribed lease entered into by the landlord and participant and a housing assistance payment agreement entered into by the landlord and the UCHA. Funds are also used to pay security deposits and payment of any damage to the property. Participants are expected to contribute approximately 30 percent of their income towards the rent with the ultimate goal of the participant assuming 100 percent of the rent over a period of time. JBHP organizers felt this approach was less expensive and would likely be accepted by local landlords. The primary objective of JBHP is to eventually facilitate the transition of the participant into permanent housing via the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher program (HCV).

The lease is governed by the Terms of Tenancy under state landlord tenant laws and terms of HCV programs, even though HCV funds are not initially used. By following this agreement, when grant funds are expended, a tenant can move seamlessly into the HCV program. Once a participant enters the HCV program, the housing assistance payment agreement will end and HCV program regulations will begin.

JBHP is currently in its ninth month of operation. Organizers are learning valuable lessons as they progress and are adapting the program accordingly. As of February 2013, there were six participants placed into temporary or bridge housing. Unfortunately, almost all have experienced obstacles in their re-entry which has compelled organizers to assess supportive services.

As result, organizers realize Union County could benefit from additional technical assistance provided by PCCD accompanied with collaborative re-entry planning. Union County CJAB is planning to formally assess re-entry initiatives in the county and establish a re-entry plan assisting those in the JBHP along with all offenders reintegrating back into the community.

Union County CJAB serves as a model for collaboration and unique partnerships and it is for this reason that PCCD Staff proudly nominates the Union County CJAB for the County Commissioners' Association of Pennsylvania 2013 CJAB Best Practices Award.