



COUNTY HIGHLIGHT:

BERKS

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THE **STEPPING UP** INITIATIVE

**The Stepping
Up Initiative
is a national
effort to divert
people with
mental illness
from jails and
into treatment.**

STEPPING UP:

The Berks County Experience

Since 2000, when Berks County held our first Sequential Intercept mapping, the mental health forensic population has been a focus for Berks County with a foundational belief that those who have a mental illness and have committed nonviolent offenses should not be incarcerated. Through this belief and a county wide collaborative effort, we have been able to develop the mental health forensic services that are currently available to Berks County residents.

The Berks County Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Program (MH/DD) has worked to immerse itself in opportunities to learn more about the needs of individuals with mental health diagnoses who have involvement in the criminal justice system in an effort to divert this population of individuals to the most appropriate level of care. These efforts began well before the National Stepping Up Initiative in May of 2015 and the local Stepping Up Resolution which was passed by the Berks County Commissioners on December 10, 2015.



However, the Stepping Up Initiative and the impact that a strategic plan stemming from this initiative could have on our county aided in accelerating our efforts to improve diversion and forensic services. In support of this initiative, the Berks County MH/DD Program continues to work with the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP) to develop new avenues for diversion to be achieved in Berks County.

13 TEAMS

In September 2017, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the National Association of Counties (NACo) and the Laura and John Arnold Foundation (LJAF) hosted the Data-Driven Justice and Behavioral Health Design Institute (Design Institute) in Rockville, Md. The Design Institute identified 13 teams committed to the Data-Driven Justice Initiative (DDJI). Teams were selected through a competitive process to work directly with expert faculty in facilitated sessions and workshops to create action plans for developing and using integrated data systems that would aid their jurisdictions in identifying high utilizers of jail and crisis services.

Berks County was fortunate to be chosen to participate in the DDJI and we were able to develop an action plan that further guides our efforts to develop a data-driven system that provides treatment and other supportive services to individuals with mental illnesses and substance abuse disorders who are involved in the justice system. The Design Institute helped us to identify opportunities to improve communication across our systems and to use data more strategically, including refining and strengthening how the county delivers

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services for the best outcomes.

In Berks County, diversion services are offered through a mental health liaison in collaboration with many community partners including the Magisterial District Justices, Court of Common Pleas Judges, law enforcement, District Attorney and Public Defenders' offices and crisis intervention services. Through this work, Berks has been able to identify 718 individuals and divert 384 from incarceration. The diversions can occur at the point of interaction with law enforcement pre-arrest, or after the individuals have been incarcerated in the interest of decreasing incarceration time. The services that are offered are typically inclusive of treatment alternatives and case management in lieu of incarceration.

These services, including out-patient, forensic diversion liaison, forensic case management and peer services are also designed to work in conjunction with probation and parole as needed. Through extensive collaboration in

our diversion efforts, Berks County currently has a recidivism rate of 6.7 percent for those individuals who have participated in the programming, with only 26 individuals having reoffended during their involvement in or after completing the diversion plan.

RECOVERY AND INDEPENDENCE

Specialized forensic services that are available to individuals diagnosed with mental illness who also have involvement in the criminal justice system include forensic case management and forensic peer services. These services are designed to work in conjunction with diversion services, but can also be offered independently. The forensic case management services are designed to assist individuals involved in the development of goals in order to work towards their recovery and their own independence. Each service plan is unique to the individual needs of the participant and focuses on the

goal of remaining in the community as opposed to incarceration while working on other life goals.

The forensic peer specialist services are offered by individuals who also have been diagnosed with mental health concerns. The goal of the service is to work side-by-side with individuals to work towards recovery through the development of individualized goals and a wellness recovery action plan (WRAP). The forensic peer specialist services are also offered to individuals who are incarcerated in the Berks County jail system as a means to cope with the stressors associated with incarceration, while preparing for reentry into our community.

In order to ensure continued collaboration, the Berks County MH/DD Program has worked to develop the Forensic Coalition. The coalition is comprised of a variety of professionals ranging from mental health practitioners and law enforcement officials to other community agencies who all share a common goal of wanting to divert individuals with mental health diagnoses out of the prison system. The coalition was designed to offer educational and networking opportunities to ensure that collaboration is at the forefront

of our practice. The coalition meetings are held on a quarterly basis, and new members are always being recruited to join the efforts in Berks County.

INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

More recently, the Berks County MH/DD Program coordinated a forensic conference, which was held on June 18, 2018 and was attended by nearly 200 participants. The conference focused on Berks County professionals, as well as those within the surrounding counties, educating them on relevant training topics that affect individuals with a forensic background who also have mental health concerns. I, Dr. Ed Michalik from the Berks County MH/DD Program, Brinda Penyak from the CCAP, and Kati Habert from the Council of State Governments Justice Center were honored to present information related to the Stepping Up Initiative, the CCAP Comprehensive Behavioral Health Task Force, and the local efforts offered within Berks County to enhance diversion.

Dr. Jack Rozel from the University of Pittsburgh then focused on the link between individuals with mental health diagnoses and violent crimes committed with firearms.

He highlighted gun violence as an American problem, while offering information on mass shootings that have occurred in our country. The feedback from attendees and presenters was positive, with all expressing that the content and experience was helpful and useful in relation to the work they do to assist individuals with mental health concerns who are involved in the criminal justice system.

Our focus on the forensic and behavioral health population in Berks County has brought to light the effectiveness of numerous resources that are available locally. Many professionals and agencies have shown their dedication to assist individuals in need of diversion, in an effort to reduce recidivism while maintaining the safety of our community. The work that is done in Berks County would not be possible without the support of the Berks County Commissioners, the Berks County MH/DD Program, and all other law enforcement and mental health professionals who have made the forensic population a priority for their work. These collaborative efforts have demonstrated the effects of teamwork on the larger community, the criminal justice system and most importantly, the individuals we serve. 🍷

