

Travis County Probation: A Mental Health Learning Site



I. What are learning sites?

With support from National Institute of Corrections (NIC), the Council of State Governments Justice Center (Justice Center) works with teams of corrections and mental health administrators in select jurisdictions across the country to accomplish the following:

- Improve public safety and public health outcomes for individuals with mental illnesses involved in the criminal justice system
- Increase collaboration and coordination among the different components of the criminal justice system (law enforcement, courts, and corrections) and community-based service providers
- Utilize data to inform quality improvement processes
- Make more efficient use of limited corrections and mental health services resources
- Translate lessons learned at the local level into comprehensive statewide initiatives

II. What are the goals of the Travis County learning site?

Travis County learning site representatives and Justice Center staff hope to achieve the following goals:

- Determine how various criminal justice/mental health initiatives relate to each other and identify existing overlap in their target populations to ensure that these initiatives are having an overall positive impact

- Standardize the procedures used to screen and assess individuals with mental illnesses when they are admitted to jail, appear before courts, and are accepted to probation
- Evaluate the capacity and effectiveness of current court and public defender mental health initiatives to inform the design of future court-based efforts in Travis County
- Measure the impact of current probation/mental health efforts in Travis County

III. What has the Travis County learning site accomplished thus far?

Key representatives from the Travis County jail, courts, prosecutor's office, defense bar, adult probation department, community mental health service provider, and advocacy community have formed a workgroup that has met since October, 2006. In this short time, the group has:

- Prioritized a target population on which to focus initial learning site activity
- Developed flowcharts of jail intake and probation caseload assignment processes
- Agreed on a standard assessment instrument that jail staff and community-based mental health service providers will both use, and conducted cross-trainings between staff at these agencies on the use of the instrument

- Developed a plan to collect and analyze data on the target population as it moves from the jail, through the court system, and onto specialized probation caseloads

IV. How are learning sites selected and what issues do they tackle?

The Justice Center and NIC identify jurisdictions where corrections and mental health system leaders have made it a priority to increase collaboration between their systems. These sites were selected not because they are “models,” but rather because they have demonstrated a history of innovation, have focused on a specific issue area around which they would benefit from technical assistance, and expressed a willingness to share their successes and setbacks with other jurisdictions. To date, the states of Rhode Island and Kansas, and the counties of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Orange County, Florida, have served as learning sites.

In Orange County, Florida, county leaders and jail and mental health officials designed a variety of initiatives to divert people with mental illnesses from jail to the community, but they lacked data to measure the impact of these initiatives and to determine how these programs could be improved. The Justice Center worked with the Orange County learning site to realize the following goals:

- Assess the effectiveness of a pre-trial jail release program, resulting in an expansion of the number of people served and the community services they received
- Leverage the lessons learned at the county level to inform a comprehensive statewide strategy to improve the response to people with mental illnesses in county jails

The Council of State Governments Justice Center is a national nonprofit organization that serves policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels from all branches of government. The Center provides practical, nonpartisan advice and consensus-driven strategies, informed by available evidence, to increase public safety and strengthen communities. The board of directors for the center includes, as its vice chairperson, the Honorable Sharon Keller, Presiding Judge of the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals. Representative Jerry Madden, Chair of the Texas House Corrections Committee, also serves on this board. Technical assistance provided to the Travis County Learning Site is funded by the National Institute of Corrections (NIC). Dr. Tony Fabelo, working with designated agency and legislative staff in Texas, coordinates the project in Texas for the Justice Center.

To learn more about the Mental Health Court Learning Sites, visit <http://consensusproject.org/mhcp>

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