

Mental Health Diversion Facility Background

Miami-Dade County is home to the largest percentage of people with serious mental illnesses (e.g., schizophrenia spectrum disorders, bipolar disorder, and major depression) of any urban community in the United States. Rates of serious mental illnesses among county residents are nearly three times the national average, yet for years state funding for treatment in the community has ranked among the lowest in the country. Overall, 9.1% of the population in Miami-Dade County (175,000 adults and 50,000 children) experience serious mental illnesses, yet only about 1% of adults (24,000) and less than 3% of children (15,000) receive treatment in the state funded community mental health treatment system.

The Miami-Dade County jail currently serves as the largest psychiatric institution in Florida, containing nearly half as many beds for individuals with mental illnesses as all state civil and forensic mental health treatment facilities combined. Each year, it is estimated there are nearly 20,000 bookings into the jail involving people with mental illnesses who require treatment while incarcerated. On any given day, the jail houses approximately 1,200 individuals receiving psychiatric medications and costs Miami-Dade County taxpayers nearly \$60 million annually, or \$160,000 per day.

A recent analysis by the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute at the University of South Florida found that over a five year period 97 individuals with serious mental illnesses in Miami-Dade County identified as “heavy users” of acute care and institutional services accounted for 2,200 bookings into the jail, 27,000 days in jail, and 13,000 days in crisis units, state hospitals, and emergency rooms. On average, each individual was booked into the county jail between four and five times per year and spent nearly a quarter of their time incarcerated or in other institutional settings. The cost to taxpayers for these services is conservatively estimated at \$13 million.

Because of associated difficulties such as substance abuse, homelessness, and crime, untreated serious mental illnesses affect nearly every member of the community either directly or indirectly. This results from the devastation of families and individual lives, wasteful spending of taxpayers’ dollars on policies and strategies that do little more than help ensure the continuing cycles of recidivism and despair, and compromised public health and public safety for residents and visitors. While the community has made significant strides in reducing the number of chronically homeless individuals living on the streets in Miami-Dade County, a disproportionate number of those who remain, particularly in the downtown area, experience serious mental illnesses. Furthermore, it is estimated that at least 50% of these individuals have histories of involvement in the criminal justice system.

The Mental Health Diversion Facility was approved by voters in November 2004 as part of the *Building Better Communities General Obligation Bond Program*, and was created “to free up jail space and provide an effective and cost-efficient alternative facility to house [people with mental illnesses] as they await a trial date.” Early planning was undertaken by the Miami-Dade County Mayor’s Mental Health Task Force. Substantial work of this subcommittee involved securing the long-term lease of a former state forensic hospital in which to house the project, along with development of recommendations for the most effective use of this property.

With a budget of \$22.1 million for capital investment in this project, the Task Force recommended that the facility be renovated to house a variety of treatment and support services (e.g., crisis stabilization unit, short-term residential treatment, transitional housing, outpatient treatment services, employment and vocational services, and entitlement benefits programs such as Social Security and Medicaid) that provide a full continuum of care and are designed to assist individuals with community re-entry and reduce the likelihood of recidivism to the justice system, crisis settings, and homelessness in the future. In addition to community based treatment and support services, it was recommended that a portion of the facility be used to house select inmates in the custody of the Miami-Dade Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation who have been identified as candidates for diversion, or otherwise are inappropriate for housing placement in other areas of the jail. Task Force recommendations included incorporation of a courtroom and space for court personnel to conduct hearings on site as well.

In addition to lengthy delays in this project, concerns have been raised as to whether funding for the project is being used in a way that is consistent with the will of the voters. Included among the concerns is that funding is being used not to free up jail space, but to create additional capacity within the Miami-Dade Corrections and Rehabilitation Department to house inmates with mental illnesses. In recent months, two more inmates with mental illnesses have died while in custody. The intention of the Mental Health Diversion Facility is to create an alternative treatment setting where individuals with serious mental illnesses may be diverted to receive appropriate psychiatric care, while ensuring public safety and reducing costs to county taxpayers. Attempting to provide such services in a correctional setting is at odds with the purpose and function of a jail as has been demonstrated time and again in Miami-Dade County.

While the need to create additional housing for inmates with serious mental illnesses within the Miami-Dade County jail is well documented and overdo, using funds approved by voters for a purpose contrary to this aim is inappropriate. Resources for the creation of additional jail space should be identified within funding specifically allocated to the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation for this purpose. For the vision of the diversion facility to succeed, it is critical to ensure sufficient capacity within state and federally funded, non-custodial residential treatment programs which will allow the county to, in fact, free up jail space, while also saving local taxpayer dollars. The plan set forth by the Mayor's Mental Health Task Force was developed with input and consensus from a broad array of community stakeholders both within the criminal justice system and the community mental health system. It is well regarded and has strong support and buy-in from these constituencies. Please recognize the will of the voters by ensuring this project moves forward as intended, and as quickly as possible, before more tragedies occur.