

Breaking the cycle of incarceration

By Jim Cornelius
Editor in Chief

Some 45 percent of people in our jails and prisons struggle with mental health challenges, and as many as 75 percent have substance abuse and addiction problems.

Lezlie Neusteter of Sisters, a licensed clinical social worker, sees a grim pattern:

“Far too often, clients are released from jail homeless, depressed, anxious, feeling hopeless and overwhelmed. Lacking basic support, they return to the same toxic environments with little chance of engaging in treatment. Direct placement into treatment provides a seamless transition giving the client the stability and support they need to successfully comply with probation, court mandates and to engage fully in treatment. Treatment saves lives. It benefits the client, their family, and our community.”

Neusteter’s practice, Central Oregon Forensic Social Work, seeks to break the cycle of incarceration by connecting inmates direct from jail to intensive in-patient treatment.

Forensic social work occurs within the criminal justice system. Neusteter is engaged directly by public defenders to go into the jail and perform an assessment on a client, including treatment history and needs.

“The vast amount of clients I work with have been cycling in and out of homelessness and incarceration for years,” she told *The Nugget*. “For many years.”

She makes treatment recommendations and if

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those recommendations are accepted through the courts, she coordinates treatment — ideally long-term residential treatment. Such coordination is critical to people who need treatment but lack the capability to access it on their own.

“So many clients I work with are desperate for treatment, but they haven’t had the resources or support to get into treatment,” Neusteter said. “They’re often homeless, often without a phone. They’re focused on food and shelter.”

The effort is impeded by a basic lack of treatment slots available.

“We have a dire shortage of long-term mental-health and substance-abuse facilities in this state,” Neusteter said.

It can take four to six weeks to secure a spot — and if a client has left incarceration in the meantime, they may have reverted to their previous patterns of behavior.

“Sometimes I lose them because their sentence isn’t long enough,” Neusteter said.

Neusteter and many other advocates in the field emphasize that investing in treatment is a cost-savings in the long run, both in terms of dollars and in social capital. Getting eligible people “to go from the criminal justice

system to the healthcare system where they belong,” Neusteter asserts, gets at the root cause of incarceration and is “far cheaper” than continually cycling people in and out of jail.

“We could significantly reduce recidivism, reduce the crime rate, reduce homelessness,” she said. “We’re missing a really big opportunity to interrupt the cycle of incarceration with these people.”

Neusteter has a deep background in the field. She worked with the City of Long Beach Homeless Bureau and was instrumental in creating a veterans justice outreach program in San Diego County to divert veterans with traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress out of the criminal justice system.

She says that the “system” in Central Oregon recognizes the value of her current work.

“I’m receiving a lot of

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PHOTO PROVIDED

Lezlie Neusteter of Sisters practices forensic social work, endeavoring to connect people with addiction and/or mental health challenges with services that can help keep them out of jail and prison.

support,” she said. “I’m genuinely encouraged by the support I’ve been receiving from the DA and judges in Deschutes County.”

Neusteter is accepting donations to assist clients going from jail to residential treatment programs who are in need of used clothing and other basic necessities. If you are interested in donating, send a check or money order to: Central Oregon Forensic Social Work, PO Box 1716, Sisters, OR 97759, or call to arrange donations of clothing and new hygiene items at 541-728-3036.

St. Charles’ visitor policy changes

Because the number of COVID-19 cases in the community continues to be high, St. Charles Health System will no longer allow hospitalized COVID-19-positive patients to receive visitors under most circumstances.

To protect St. Charles’ patients and caregivers, door screeners and guest services teams will notify any visitors who intend to visit COVID-19-positive patients that they will not be allowed to visit.

St. Charles will once again encourage COVID-19-positive patients to use iPads for communication with their family members.

“This was a tough decision, but a necessary one to ensure the safety of our patients and caregivers,” said Dr. Jeff Absalon, the health system’s chief physician executive. “The risk of exposure continues to be high, so we must do everything we can to prevent further spread of the virus.”

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