

Oregon targets mental health

Initiative seeks policy to reduce recidivism

Virginia Barreda Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

State leaders announced a project Oct. 31 to change how Oregon responds to people in the criminal justice system who have mental illnesses and substance addictions.

Following the announcement, Oregon's Behavioral Health Justice Reinvestment Steering Committee launched the federally funded Justice Reinvestment Initiative.

The goal of the committee is to develop statewide policy using collective data to help reduce recidivism and improve health outcomes for people with mental issues who repeatedly cycle through public safety and health systems.

The committee is made up of 28 people from law enforcement and Oregon's justice and healthcare systems, as well as state and county officials and people with lived experience.

People with serious mental illnesses are being referred to jails and other institutions that are not equipped to provide them with the treatment they need, according to Patrick Allen, director of Oregon Health Authority. A broader strategy is needed.

"The general notion is to use the data in the experience of people in the steering group, and those on council to identify the strategies that are most effective," Allen said.

The process is expected to lead to a series of policy recommendations for the 2019 Legislature to consider, according to Steve Allen, senior policy adviser with the Council of State Governments Justice Center.

Sharing data needed across agencies

Wednesday's meeting focused on three areas: housing, the Oregon State Hospital and data sharing among stakeholders.

The committee conducted an initial review of eight jails, which will be matched with Oregon State Hospital data, Medicaid data and community corrections data.

Leaders from the council's Justice Center have visited 27 of the 36 counties and talked with stakeholders of all levels of government and support services, Allen said. In addition to the data, they're gathering a fairly clear picture of the logistical challenges in each county.

"Each of those counties have some of



Marion County Jail. STATESMAN JOURNAL FILE

the pieces of infrastructure that are useful," Allen said. "But we're also hearing that there's some critical missing pieces."

Allen said he's seen some good examples of counties that are succeeding, but did not want to mention them at the risk of "offending counties."

According to data from the council's Justice Center, a small number of people accounts for a large percentage of annual jail admissions.

For example, 6 percent of people booked into the Clackamas County jail in 2017 accounted for almost 20 percent of all bookings.

According to the Oregon State Forum on Behavioral Health and Public Safety, the new initiative will:

- Focus on adults in the criminal justice system who have serious behavioral health conditions.

- Will be driven by collaborative engagement between behavioral health and criminal justice agencies at all levels.

- Will focus on improving outcomes of people who repeatedly cycle through public safety and public health systems while also lowering costs by reducing the amount of resources they use in the process.

Sen. Jackie Winter, R-Salem, said the lack of support for the mentally ill is "staggering."

"It's not appropriate for the jail to be the place for the mentally ill," she said. The committee's job is to figure out "how do we treat the individual without sending them into the criminal justice system."

Marion County Sheriff Jason Myers

agreed that, although deputies are trained to help those in crisis, jail is not the right place for those dealing with mental illness.

"We need community-based resources where we can move them to a center and not jail," Myers said. "We need to identify programs and resources to direct people to the right place in their time of need."

Winters called insufficient data sharing an "obstacle," and said it often prevents lawmakers from implementing effective policies to help the mentally ill.

Financing the committee

Committee member Sen. Peter Courtney, D-Salem, said the project will require a shift in money as well as additional funds.

How much? No one on the committee has an answer.

It is unknown what the cost of the program will be until all the data is received to determine what the recommendations will be, according to Winters.

Courtney said there will be a shift of priorities when it comes to the criminal justice system over the next 10 years because "we know we're locking up way too many people and many of them are mentally ill."

While other states are already ahead in the process, Courtney said the committee is "sending a signal that we're here to have that overseen in a way that never been overseen before."

Courtney said mental illness has been a topic of discussion for as long as he's been in office. "A number of people are locked up and we're not doing anything for them," he said.

"It's very simple," he said. "The 5,000-ton chicken in the middle of the room is this person is mentally ill and we're going to treat them as though we're going to put them in prison. That's not what should be done. So it's hopeful that we won't be in that situation when we get through this. That's the biggest breakthrough."

Contact the reporter at vbarreda@statesmanjournal.com or 503-399-6657.

BRIEFS

Senior board game nights pass go

Yahtzee, Sorry, Scrabble, Boggle, Othello, Ticket to Ride, Taboo, Clue, Pictionary, Monopoly, or whatever game you bring – that's the entertainment at Silverton Senior Center's weekly game nights.

Once again, the center is hosting game nights every Saturday from 5 to 8 p.m. Soft drinks and coffee will be available, and participants are encouraged to bring snacks. Each member and one guest can attend for free.

The center is located at 115 Westfield St.

'Westing Game' playing at Silverton High

A classic whodunit, "The Westing Game," is Silverton High School's fall play, opening Thursday, Nov. 8.

A show that keeps audiences on their toes, "The Westing Game" is a stage adaption of the 1978 award-winning novel of the same name, penned by Ellen Raskin. In it, a group of unrelated heirs compete to solve the murder of reclusive businessman Samuel Westing. The prize is one dizzyingly big inheritance – and winner takes all!

The Westing Game plays three times in the high school auditorium: Nov. 8, 9 and 10, starting at 7 p.m. each night. Tickets are \$1.

Appeal Tribune

Address: P.O. Box 13009, Salem, OR 97309
Phone: 503-399-6773
Fax: 503-399-6706
Email: sanews@salem.gannett.com
Web site: www.SilvertonAppeal.com

Staff

News Director
Don Currie
503-399-6655
dcurrie@statesmanjournal.com

Advertising
Terri McArthur
503-399-6630
tmcarthur@salem.gannett.com

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Published every Wednesday by the Statesman Journal, P.O. Box 13009, Salem, OR 97309.

USPS 469-860, Postmaster: Send address changes to Appeal Tribune, P.O. Box 13009, Salem, OR 97309. PERIODICALS POSTAGE PAID: Salem, OR and additional offices.

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