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A report on the Multnomah County Department of Corrections during the last three months of 2014 found evidence that many inmates had a pattern of repeat incarceration in an apparent attempt to access mental health services within the jail.

In an effort to get more funding for mental health alternatives and to better understand how it can further reduce disparities, Multnomah County applied for and won the first phase of a competitive grant from the MacArthur Foundation.

It was one of 20 jurisdictions awarded \$150,000 in the first phase, but only 10 jurisdictions will win \$500,000 to \$2 million in the next round based on their proposals.

In early October, Multnomah County Circuit Court Judge Edward Jones traveled to Chicago with seven other representatives from the county justice system to meet with the foundation and 19 other jurisdictions competing for the second phase of grant money.

Jones said the MacArthur Foundation wants "bold" proposals to reduce the number of jail beds, and there's a feeling in Multnomah County that most significant strategies for reductions have already been implemented.

He said he doesn't think the county will be able to stop arresting and prosecuting offenders struggling with mental illness and addiction for low-level crimes until there are better alternatives.

"Not booking them into jail means we're not prosecuting them - what is the officer going to do with those people? We're dealing with them because the community isn't," he said. "People are very supportive of law enforcement, but not of social services. But everyone in the system knows we can do more with social services."

Underhill voted alongside county

colleagues on Nov. 3 to approve three ways the county plans to move forward on a proposal for the MacArthur grant, although it's not proposing any strategies that will significantly reduce jail beds, which may hinder its chances of winning.

Jones said to make additional significant dents in the county jail population, would "require a lot more than fine tuning. It would take basic changes about how we look at crime and dealing with it."

Underhill said the county plans to initiate three actions, starting with understanding and reducing racial and ethnic disparity at every point in the justice system - from calls for service from victims to re-entry.

He said anecdotally that county officials believe crime victims are disproportionately minorities, but there's no hard data to prove it.

The county also wants to revamp Community Court, "or at least look at it," he said. "Community court today is not what community court was in the 1990s when it began. For example, it's not even in the community, necessarily, like it used to be."

And finally, he said, the county plans a "serious drill down into mental health impacted individuals that occupy our jail."

This strategy includes incorporating health screening into the booking process, processing mentally ill individuals more quickly and expanding community-based resources for releasable detainees, according to a status update sent from an outside consulting agency to county chair Deborah Kafoury. But it's estimated this strategy would only represent a 1.2 to 2.5 percent reduction in jail use.

Untitled

by Jason Scheer

Did you not notice I was gone in your eyes?
 Caught my breath and lost my heart.
 Daydreaming again... of what, I won't admit,
 In sweaty dreams, acts of lust I commit.
 Who am I anymore, but this slave of yours?
 I am a cat chasing its tail
 Thinking I'm going to get somewhere, someday.
 I have faith love will show me the way.
 My world is forever changed, don't lose me.
 This creature of yours that I've become
 Be brave, restless heart, you're a warrior now
 Who am I anymore, but this slave of yours?
 I am a cat chasing its tail
 Thinking I'm going to get somewhere, someday.
 I have faith love will show me the way.
 I am what you need me to be,
 I am what you wish me to be,
 I twist, I writhe, I am posing and posturing,
 Calm and still, stalking silence,
 For you all I am this chameleon.

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