

MENTAL HEALTH AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

CASE STUDY: Harris County, Texas

METROPOLITAN HOUSTON POPULATION

4,441,370¹

JAIL BED CAPACITY:

10,162²

AVERAGE DAILY POPULATION:

8,439³

BACKGROUND

Harris County has one of the largest jails in Texas. About a quarter of inmates in the jail are on psychotropic medications, making it one of the largest mental health facilities in the state. In 2013, State Senator Joan Huffman (R-Houston) sponsored Texas Senate Bill 1185 (SB 1185),⁴ which created a pilot program in Harris County to divert individuals with mental illnesses from the jail. The law appropriates \$5 million annually to Harris County, which the county matches equally, to divert individuals from the jail with the goal of reducing arrests and incarceration and increasing access to housing and health and social services. During the first year of implementation, the program was required to serve no less than 200 individuals.

In June 2013, Harris County began the program development process and initial contract negotiations with the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS). The first year of the Harris County Mental Health Jail Diversion Program involved a comprehensive planning process led by Harris County Judge Ed Emmett. This process was initiated in July 2013 with individual meetings and small focus groups with community stakeholders from behavioral health, criminal justice and law enforcement.

MENTAL HEALTH JAIL DIVERSION PROGRAM

The Harris County Mental Health Jail Diversion Program (MHJDP) operates out of the Harris County Judge's Office and provides a continuum of services and supports to a targeted population – individuals with serious mental illness – to reduce involvement in the criminal justice system.

Eligibility

Community providers, law enforcement entities and criminal courts may refer potential participants to the MHJDP. Eligible participants must have been booked into the Harris County Jail three or more times in the past two years and have a diagnosed serious mental illness (Schizophrenia, Bipolar Disorder, Major Depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)) with or without substance use disorder. Priority consideration is given to individuals receiving current treatment in the jail's Mental Health Unit or having a history of recurring psychotropic medication in the jail and who are between the ages of 18-35. The inclusion of individuals with PTSD expands access to care for veterans who do not qualify for federal Veterans Assistance. The program is voluntary and excludes certain offenses such as homicide and sex offenses.

The Texas Risk Assessment System (TRAS) is a critical component of the eligibility process. This tool identifies criminogenic risk factors that are associated with recidivism. A moderate to high risk score is required for eligibility. The TRAS and other clinical information are used to develop the preliminary treatment plan.

In Fiscal Year 2015, 301 individuals were enrolled in the MHJDP. A typical participant (both male and female) is Black/African American, average age of 38, homeless and presents with both substance use disorders and mental illnesses, namely bipolar disorder or major depression. The average participant had four bookings in the Harris County Jail within a two-year period prior to enrollment.

Case Management and Services

The Harris Center for Mental Health and IDD,⁵ the mental health authority for Harris County, is the primary provider of the MHJDP. The Harris Center works through three teams: jail-based, community/clinic-based and Critical Time Intervention (CTI), an evidence-based practice for clients leaving psychiatric hospitals and the criminal justice system who are homeless and have a severe mental illness and/or substance use disorder.⁶ These three teams provide:

- eligibility and screening
- assessment and engagement
- substance use disorder interventions and cognitive behavioral therapy
- peer support
- medication management, and
- intensive case management.

As mandated by the legislation, all program components incorporate the principles of Critical Time Intervention, which include intensive case management with low caseloads. In addition, all MHJDP case managers have been trained in SOAR (SSI/SSDI, Outreach, Access and Recovery) to help clients enroll in benefits.⁷

The MHJDP has started an alumni group through the Harris Center for individuals who have successfully transitioned out of the program and is also developing an advisory council of past participants to provide feedback on the program. The county has placed a strong emphasis on hiring and training peer support specialists to provide additional support for clients.

Permanent Supportive Housing

Healthcare for the Homeless Houston and SEARCH Homeless Services are responsible for the Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) component of the MHJDP. PSH is an evidence-based practice that incorporates housing and supportive services for people with serious mental illnesses.

TRAINED PROVIDERS WORK TOGETHER TO HELP PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS ACCESS:

- mental health and/or substance use treatment
- permanent and temporary housing
- peer support
- assistance with basic needs such as clothing and food
- rehabilitation
- transportation
- vocational/education
- care coordination, and
- health services.

Per the legislation, Harris County is required to equally match the funding provided by the state for the program. As part of this match requirement, the Harris County Housing Authority provided 100 vouchers to the program to place people who meet the federal definition of chronically homeless in permanent supportive housing.⁸ Participants complete the application process and, if approved, they reside in an apartment complex where services are provided by PSH staff. Funding is also available for temporary housing for people who don't meet the definition of chronically homeless. The MHJDP contracts with local residential providers to provide housing for at least 90 days. While individuals are in temporary housing, case managers work to identify available benefits and long-term housing solutions. In addition, the county contracts with local hotel chains to place people in emergency housing while they wait for a permanent housing slot. While in these different residential settings, individuals receive case management services, therapy and other supports.

About 35 percent (105) of the 301 MHJDP participants received housing support funded by the program following enrollment. Sixty-four percent (194) of all participants needed housing and of those, 24 percent were chronically homeless and placed in Permanent Supportive Housing.

PERMANENT SUPPORTIVE HOUSING INCLUDES:

- integrated primary and behavioral healthcare
- clinical case management
- substance use disorder interventions and cognitive behavioral therapy
- peer support through community health workers, and
- medication management.

OUTCOMES

Statistical analyses were performed on a sample of 371 participants who were enrolled and/or left the program in Fiscal Year 2015 and the beginning of Fiscal Year 2016. The following preliminary results were observed:

- Participants had received an average of 8 months (241 days) of service.
- There was a reduction in the number of bookings for people enrolled in the program and 44.1 percent (164) have had no further bookings into the Harris County Jail.
- Jail days were reduced by approximately 53 days per person, yielding a savings of 19,744 total jail days. At \$149/day, the cost of these jail days can be estimated to result in a cost avoidance of \$2,941,856.

One of the requirements of SB1185 is to submit a formal evaluation report to the Department of State Health Services (DSHS) in the fall of 2016, which must include information on additional program outcomes such as a comparison of treatment approaches, cost effectiveness and a cost-benefits analysis. DSHS will present the report to the Texas State Legislature in December 2016. This process will help demonstrate effective strategies for reducing recidivism among a high-risk population and encourage the state to implement similar programs in other counties across Texas.

"We are fortunate in Harris County to be the beneficiaries of one of the state's most enlightened and comprehensive pilot programs regarding mental health – the Harris County Mental Health Jail Diversion Program," said Harris County Judge Ed Emmett. "We are working to reduce the number of mentally ill residents being sent to our jail. It is far better for these people to be referred to mental health programs."

RESOURCE

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ENDNOTES

¹ Harris County, Texas. U.S. Census Bureau. Available at: <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/48/48201.html>. Accessed December 3, 2015.

² Texas Commission on Jail Standards - Abbreviated Population Report for 11/1/2015. <http://www.tcjs.state.tx.us/docs/AbbreRptCurrent.pdf>.

³ Office of Criminal Justice Coordination November 2015 Jail Population report. https://cjcc.harriscountytexas.gov/Documents/Jail%20Population%20Presentation%20and%20Graphs%202015_11.pdf.

⁴ Texas Senate Bill 1185. <https://legiscan.com/TX/bill/SB1185/2013>.

⁵ Formerly the Mental Health and Mental Retardation Authority of Harris County, The Harris Center for Mental Health and IDD serves adults and children with mental health and intellectual or developmental disabilities.

⁶ For more information on CIT, visit <http://sssw.hunter.cuny.edu/cti/cti-model/>.

⁷ For more information on SOAR, visit <http://soarworks.prainc.com/>.

⁸ HUD has defined chronic homelessness as an individual or family with a disabling condition who has been continuously homeless for a year or more or has had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years.