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‘Stepping Up’ to Reduce the Number of People with Mental Illnesses in U.S. Jails

Launch of New National Initiative Offers Counties Research-Based Support to Address a Growing Crisis and Create Measurable Change

WASHINGTON, D.C.—May 5, 2015—The National Association of Counties (NACo), the Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center and the American Psychiatric Foundation (APF) today launched [Stepping Up: A National Initiative to Reduce the Number of People with Mental Illnesses in Jails](#), an unprecedented national collaboration designed to generate action in communities across the country.

The number of people with mental illnesses in U.S. jails has reached a crisis point: 2 million adults with serious mental illnesses—such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depression—are admitted to jails each year, many of whom also have drug and alcohol use problems. Allowing them to continually cycle through jails does nothing to improve public safety, stresses already strained budgets, and hurts people with mental illnesses and their loved ones.

Stepping Up provides counties with a clear direction for developing an action plan that makes effective use of budgets to facilitate access to treatment and promote appropriate alternatives to jail. County leaders who embrace this call to action are asked to pass a resolution committing to key actions, including collecting data to determine the extent of the problem within each jail, developing a plan with a team of diverse stakeholders that draws on sound research, and designing an approach to track progress. With support from the Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) and with direction from other [national organizations](#), the initiative offers practical guidance and support to counties, including expert direction on collaborative planning and evidence-based practices. [Some communities have already signed on.](#)

“It is not an efficient use of taxpayer resources to incarcerate people with mental illnesses because jails are not designed to provide the services and treatments those individuals need,” said Council Member Riki Hokama of Maui County, Hawaii, president of NACo. “Counties are stepping up and making remarkable strides to address this challenge, but the problem is more acute than ever. This call to action is about learning from one another and using the latest research to implement systems-level, lasting improvements.”

A National Public Health and Safety Crisis

Once incarcerated, people with mental illnesses tend to stay longer in jail and are at higher risk of re-arrest than individuals without these illnesses. Jails also spend two to three times more on people with mental illnesses than they do on people without these issues. Anywhere from 20 to 60 percent of a county’s budget goes toward costs associated with jails. The additional time and resources devoted to these individuals do little to reduce reincarceration or advance recovery. Leaders in criminal justice and behavioral health agree something must be done on a national scale.

“People with mental illnesses who encounter the criminal justice system need treatment so they are put on a path to recovery,” said Saul Levin, M.D., M.P.A. chairman of the American Psychiatric Foundation. “We need to improve the availability of community-based behavioral health care services and we, as providers, must take steps to deliver integrated substance abuse and mental health treatment. We welcome this opportunity.”

Jonathan F. Thompson, executive director of the National Sheriffs' Association, added, "In representing this country's more than 3,000 elected sheriffs—operating most of the nation's jails that are being used as de facto mental health facilities—the National Sheriffs' Association is encouraged by this initiative to ensure safe and appropriate alternatives to incarceration and treatment services for people with mental illnesses in our communities."

"The number of people admitted into jails each year is tantamount to locking up the combined populations of Vermont and New Hampshire. We can't be asking counties to step up to this challenge alone. State government is an important partner of these efforts," said Mike Lawlor, Connecticut's under-secretary of Criminal Justice Policy and Planning and chair of the CSG Justice Center. "For example, states and counties need to be aligned in how they define severity of mental illness or else we run the risk of referring people to services who don't qualify for them."

People with mental illnesses, their family members, and advocates, will play an important role in the Stepping Up Initiative, encouraging partners in government to embrace the initiative's Call to Action and participating in the work ahead.

"When we talk about people with mental illness, we're talking about parents, children, and siblings. We are pleased that the voices of people with mental illness and their loved ones are part of this initiative, and we look forward to supporting advocates across the country calling on elected officials in their jurisdiction to step up," said Mary Gilberti, executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

The Stepping Up Initiative's Call to Action is being introduced at 12 p.m. (EDT) on May 5 at a press conference outside of the U.S. Capitol. Among those expected to speak in support of the initiative are:

- U.S. Sen. Al Franken (D-MN)
- Former U.S. Rep. Patrick Kennedy (D-RI)
- Denise O'Donnell, director of the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance

In response to this call to action, a series of events across the country is scheduled to demonstrate support for the initiative and to highlight effective efforts to address the high prevalence of mental illness in jails. Scheduled events will take place in Johnson County (KS at the Johnson County Crisis Recovery Center (Date: 5/5; Time: 11 a.m. EDT); Miami-Dade County (FL) at the Children's Courthouse (Date: 5/6; Time: 10:30 a.m. EDT); Sacramento (CA) for the California State Association of Counties, at the California State Capitol (Date: 5/7; Time: 1:30 p.m. EDT). Live-stream broadcasts of the events will be available [here](#).

"We know more now than ever before what types of approaches can advance both recovery and recidivism-reduction goals," said Denise O'Donnell, director of the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance. The proposed initiative will leverage a broad range of strategies that improve diversion, community-based treatment, crisis intervention by police, specialty courts and supervision caseloads, reentry planning and other approaches that can be taken to the next level."

For more information on Stepping Up, visit www.stepuptogether.org.

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About NACo

The National Association of Counties (NACo) is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States. Founded in 1935, NACo assists America's 3,069 counties in pursuing excellence in public service to produce healthy, vibrant, safe and resilient counties. NACo promotes sound public policies, fosters county solutions and innovation,

promotes intergovernmental and public-private collaboration and provides value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. For more information, visit www.naco.org.

About the CSG Justice Center

The Council of State Governments Justice Center is a national nonprofit organization that serves policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels from all branches of government. It provides practical, nonpartisan advice and evidence-based, consensus-driven strategies to increase public safety and strengthen communities. For more information about the CSG Justice Center, visit www.csgjusticecenter.org.

About APF

The American Psychiatric Foundation, a subsidiary of the American Psychiatric Association, works to create a mentally healthy nation by advancing mental health, overcoming mental illness, and eliminating stigma. The American Psychiatric Association is a national medical specialty society whose physician members specialize in the diagnosis, treatment, prevention and research of mental illnesses, including substance use disorders. Visit APA at www.psychiatry.org and the APF at www.americanpsychiatricfoundation.org.