

# A Model Shared Definition of Serious Mental Illness & Practical Strategies for Its Use to Reduce the Number of People with Mental Illnesses in California's Jails

*"This is a shared problem. Developing a shared definition is the starting point for a shared solution."*

- Samuel Leach, Chief Probation Officer, Calaveras County

In over 30 counties across California, representing more than 70% of the state's jail population, Boards of Supervisors have passed resolutions in support of Stepping Up, a national initiative to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in jails. Local leaders are working together to develop cross-system plans that set measurable goals along Stepping Up's four outcome measures:

- ▶ Reducing the number of people with mental illness in jails,
- ▶ Reducing their average length of stay,
- ▶ Increasing the percentage of people connected to treatment, and
- ▶ Reducing their recidivism rates.

Through this collaborative approach, many counties have recognized the need for a shared definition of "serious mental illness." Adopting a common language not only ensures that all systems are using the same measure to consistently identify their target population, set baselines, and measure progress, but it also eases the inherent cultural and professional differences that arise when different professions use different terminology.

## About the Serious Mental Illness Shared Definition Workgroup

In response to requests from around the state, the County Behavioral Health Directors of California and California State Sheriffs' Association worked with other partners to draft guidance on selecting such a definition. In August 2017, an interdisciplinary workgroup co-chaired by Sheriff Bill Brown (Santa Barbara County) and Behavioral Health Director Anne Robin (San Luis Obispo County) came together to determine a *model shared definition* and provide suggestions for its use. The process included perspectives from community behavioral health, jail mental health, probation, psychiatry, and sheriffs/jail commanders from small, medium, and large counties, as well as staff from the host associations, the Board of State and Community Corrections, California State Association of Counties, and the Council of State Governments Justice Center. The guidance was developed as a tool for counties that find it useful. There is no requirement to use it for any purpose.

### Model Shared Definition

*A common language interpretation of Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) §5600.3(b)*

Serious mental illness is a severe disabling condition which impairs behaviors, thoughts, and/or emotions.

Without treatment, support, and rehabilitation, serious mental illness may interfere with the ability to do any or all of the following: manage activities of daily living, function independently, maintain personal or community safety, achieve emotional or cognitive stability, and/or develop and sustain positive relationships.

Serious mental illness includes, but is not limited to, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as major affective disorders or other severely disabling mental disorders. Individuals with serious mental illness may also have substance use problems, developmental disabilities or other physical illnesses.



### **The Model Shared Definition**

The workgroup reviewed existing definitions and quickly agreed that California’s Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) §5600.3(b) provides language that describes the target population and informs funding for relevant efforts, thereby making it an appropriate Model Shared Definition for California counties. The group quickly noted the need for easily understood language and therefore decided to develop a “common language” version of the WIC definition to promote its use as a shared definition.

### **Possible Uses for a Shared Definition**

- Establishing shared baseline data, setting measurable goals, and measuring progress.
- Stepping Up and other planning purposes.
- Interagency operations and problem-solving.
- Developing screening and assessment processes.
- Reporting “open mental health cases” in the California Board of State and Community Corrections' Jail Profile Survey.
- Public education and outreach.

For additional information, please refer to the **Frequently Asked Questions** companion guide.

### **Welfare and Institutions Code Section 5600.3(b)**

(b)(1) Adults and older adults who have a serious mental disorder.

(2) For the purposes of this part, “serious mental disorder” means a mental disorder that is severe in degree and persistent in duration, which may cause behavioral functioning which interferes substantially with the primary activities of daily living, and which may result in an inability to maintain stable adjustment and independent functioning without treatment, support, and rehabilitation for a long or indefinite period of time. Serious mental disorders include, but are not limited to, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as major affective disorders or other severely disabling mental disorders. This section shall not be construed to exclude persons with a serious mental disorder and a diagnosis of substance abuse, developmental disability, or other physical or mental disorder.

(3) Members of this target population shall meet all of the following criteria:

(A) The person has a mental disorder as identified in the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, other than a substance use disorder or developmental disorder or acquired traumatic brain injury pursuant to subdivision (a) of Section 4354 unless that person also has a serious mental disorder as defined in paragraph (2).

(B)(i) As a result of the mental disorder, the person has substantial functional impairments or symptoms, or a psychiatric history demonstrating that without treatment there is an imminent risk of decompensation to having substantial impairments or symptoms.

(ii) For the purposes of this part, “functional impairment” means being substantially impaired as the result of a mental disorder in independent living, social relationships, vocational skills, or physical condition.

(C) As a result of a mental functional impairment and circumstances, the person is likely to become so disabled as to require public assistance, services, or entitlements.

(4) For the purpose of organizing outreach and treatment options, to the extent resources are available, this target population includes, but is not limited to, persons who are any of the following:

(A) Homeless persons who are mentally ill.

(B) Persons evaluated by appropriately licensed persons as requiring care in acute treatment facilities including state hospitals, acute inpatient facilities, institutes for mental disease, and crisis residential programs.

(C) Persons arrested or convicted of crimes.

(D) Persons who require acute treatment as a result of a first episode of mental illness with psychotic features.

At the Stepping Up California Summit, the host statewide associations committed to continuing their partnership supporting counties that “step up.” The Serious Mental Illness Shared Definition Workgroup is an example of the type of work the associations continue to support.