

The Next Step: Collecting Data to Drive Change

COUNTY LEADERS ACROSS THE COUNTRY

are grappling with a crisis: a large number of people in their jails have serious mental illnesses (SMI). Policy and funding barriers, along with limited opportunities for law enforcement training and arrest alternatives in many communities, have made county and other local jails the de facto mental health facilities for people who have SMI. Counties recognize the need for systems-level change to help them improve outcomes for people who have SMI while

protecting public safety in fiscally responsible and effective ways, but many lack the information they need to understand the scale of need in their own communities.



In May 2015, **The Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center**, the **National Association of Counties (NACo)**, and the **American Psychiatric Association (APA) Foundation** partnered to create *Stepping Up*, a national initiative designed to rally local, state, and national leaders to address the crisis of mental illnesses in jails. Since that time, more than 425 counties across 43 states have passed *Stepping Up* resolutions, committing themselves to reducing the number of people in their jails who have mental illnesses. Although counties have made significant progress on addressing this issue, the problem still remains. This crisis is solvable, but it requires a new approach—one that is data-driven, focused on systems-level change, and collaborative in nature.

One of the challenges many counties face when seeking data-driven solutions to address this issue is identifying people who have SMI at the point of entry into their local criminal justice systems. Having this information not only helps connect people who have SMI to appropriate treatment and services while they are in the jail and when they return to the community, but also to provide data and information that is critical for county leaders to make policy and funding decisions that will meet the needs of their community.

THE NEXT STEP: *Stepping Up* is calling on counties to establish processes to systematically identify people who have SMI who enter their jails. The goal is to have every county collecting accurate, accessible data on these individuals.

WHAT IT ENTAILS: In order to achieve this goal, it is recommended that counties use the following approach:¹

1. **Establish a shared definition of SMI** for your *Stepping Up* efforts that is used throughout the local criminal justice and behavioral health systems;
2. **Use a validated mental health screening tool** on every person booked into the jail, and refer people who screen positive for symptoms of SMI to a follow-up clinical assessment by a licensed mental health professional; and
3. **Record clinical assessment results** and regularly report on this population to stakeholders.

¹ *Stepping Up* recognizes that jails are fast-paced environments where many people are released to the community in less than 48 hours, leaving little time to complete the recommended approach. Although counties may find that using the recommended approach is challenging due to limited resources and time constraints, it should be considered as the high bar for having accurate, accessible data on people who have SMI in jails.

