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. 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.

*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.
As part of this effort, counties will receive technical assistance to help improve their mental health screening and assessment processes and strengthen data collection and tracking.

Additionally, to help counties implement this approach, Stepping Up has selected a number of Innovator Counties to share their experiences and expertise with identifying people who have SMI in their jails and gathering and using data on these individuals. These Innovator Counties are demonstrating that this type of data collection is critical and feasible—from rural to urban counties whose populations range from 22,000 to 2.6 million. Other counties that are already using or are committed to using this approach are encouraged to contact Stepping Up at info@stepuptogether.org about joining the Innovator County cohort.

**THE OUTCOME:** Once counties are collecting and tracking data on how many people who have SMI are admitted to their jails, how long they stay in jail, whether they are connected to community-based treatment, and their recidivism rates, they'll be able to better understand the extent of the problem locally, set goals for improvement, and measure progress. Equipped with this data, counties can also target scarce resources and develop an action plan that will create a system-wide impact, ultimately protecting public safety and improving outcomes for people who have mental illnesses in their criminal justice systems and in their communities.

For more information and the latest resources to support your efforts, visit [StepUpTogether.org](http://www.StepUpTogether.org).

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*Innovator Counties are using the three-step approach to gather accurate, accessible data on the prevalence of people who have SMI in jails. There are seven Innovator Counties as of May 2018: Calaveras County, CA; Miami-Dade County, FL; Champaign County, IL; Douglas County, KS; Johnson County, KS; Franklin County, OH; and Pacific County, WA.*