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Taking a Proactive Approach to Treating the Mentally-Ill in Jail

The San Diego County Sheriff's Department has always sought to provide high quality medical and mental health services to inmates and recognizes the challenges associated with providing care within our detention facilities. Across the nation and within San Diego, there are a growing number of inmates experiencing mental health issues. As a result, the Sheriff's Department has doubled its budget for inmate mental health services to \$14 million annually, and we recently received approval for an additional \$3 million per year to recruit and hire more mental health professionals to staff our detention facilities.

In 2017, the Department made significant changes to our mental health program. The Department contracted with Liberty Healthcare Corporation to facilitate the hiring of psychologists, psychiatric nurse practitioners and psychiatrists. Liberty Healthcare is a national mental health leader in establishing many innovative programs for mentally ill inmates. The Department has also hired additional mental health clinicians to provide timely and efficient mental health services to inmates. The Department reviewed and revised processes in 2017 including mental healthcare policies and procedures, psychotropic medication management, suicide prevention, and mental health training curriculums that were specifically developed for deputies and professional staff. The revised mental health training provides staff with essential skills that are useful when interacting with mentally ill inmates.

Furthermore, the Sheriff's Department as part of our suicide prevention efforts has made significant investments in specialized housing units, structured clinical assessments, quality assurance mechanisms, and a follow up program for those identified as "at risk" for suicide. Following these efforts, the Sheriff's Department experienced but one suicide within our jails in 2017, representing an 80% drop in the number of completed suicides compared with the previous year.

Nevertheless, San Diego County's jails have, in recent years, been the subject of the false and misleading claim (originally in a series of articles in San Diego CityBeat, which have been repeated in reports issued by at least one advocacy group) that our jail system has one of the highest suicide rates in the nation. We have always strongly suspected that the extrapolated figures that were the cornerstone of these articles and reports did not paint an accurate picture of the true "suicide rate" within the jails. Because we believed that the public deserved the benefit of an independent statistical analysis on this issue, the County retained a highly skilled and respected statistician, Dr. Colleen Kelly, to conduct an independent review of inmate suicide statistics (See Dr. Kelly's Expert Report from 2010-2017). We trusted that Dr. Kelly would conduct a thorough and proper analysis of our jail suicide data, and we were prepared to accept the results of such an analysis, even if it turned out to be unfavorable to us.



As we suspected, the analysis demonstrated that the approach taken in the CityBeat articles was significantly flawed and misleading. Dr. Kelly concluded that when "at risk" population figures are correctly used to compare counties, the suicide rate in San Diego County detention facilities was comparable to other county detention facilities throughout the state. "At risk" figures take into account racial and gender discrepancies between the various detention systems as well as the varying number of inmates cycling through a jail system, and when used, San Diego County detention facilities are actually as safe as other comparably sized county jails.

That being said, simply being comparable to other counties is not good enough. We are continuously looking for best practices in our delivery of mental health services to inmates. Towards that end, the Department is consulting with Lindsay M. Hayes, a nationally recognized expert in the area of jail suicide prevention, to evaluate our programs. We expect that our consultations with a respected independent reviewer such as Mr. Hayes to scrutinize our practices (which includes on-site visits and deep analysis of our current system) will lead to further improvements and quality of care provided to inmates.

Additionally, the Sheriff's Department is in the process of obtaining national accreditation of our detention facilities with the National Commission on Correctional Healthcare (NCCHC). This organization has become the recognized leader in publishing medical and mental health standards for detention facilities, prisons, and juvenile facilities across the country. Obtaining accreditation will further validate the quality of care the Sheriff's Department provides.

Within the past few years the Sheriff's Department, by adhering to model policies and practices set forth by the NCCHC, has improved many of our practices related to mental health and suicide prevention. Examples include the implementation of security checks every 15 minutes of those in the Inmate Safety Program and the implementation of Enhanced Observation Housing for "at risk" inmates. Additionally, in the event of a completed suicide a detailed analysis is completed of all available information from multiple sources and records, to include relatives and friends as well as attending health care personnel (also known as "psychological autopsy".)

The Sheriff's Department expects the recommendations and observations by our consultants, as well as the improvements to practices as we gain accreditation, will contribute to the positive changes we have already made to our mental health services delivery system. The Department will continue to strive for improvement and provide the best possible medical and mental health services for inmates within our detention facilities.

To read more about this topic and to review Dr. Kelly's entire Expert Report, go to <http://sdsheriff.net/response>.

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