



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 8, 2020

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New Study Shows LA County Can Safely Divert Thousands of People with Mental Illness from Jail Into Treatment

On any given day, more than 3,300 people struggling with mental health disorders in Los Angeles County jails are legally suitable and clinically eligible for diversion to community-based treatment programs, according to a new study by the nonprofit RAND Corp. A significant proportion of this population is likely to be homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Conducted in response to a motion by Supervisors Mark Ridley-Thomas and Kathryn Barger, the independent research noted about 5,400 of the County's average daily inmate population – nearly one-third – are in mental health housing units and/or have been prescribed psychotropic medications.

Of the jail's mental health population, RAND concluded 61 percent meet the criteria currently used by the County's Office of Diversion and Reentry (ODR) to determine whether an individual may be put forward to the courts as a candidate for diversion. An additional 7 percent are also potentially eligible for diversion, while 32 percent are not, according to the study.

RAND said 74 percent of women and 59 percent of men with a mental health disorder in County jail are appropriate candidates for diversion.

RAND recommended expanding diversion programs and better tracking their outcomes. It also urged the County to improve its early diversion efforts, which may be able to help people before they enter the criminal justice system. For example, some jurisdictions intervene at the point of law enforcement contact.

“Knowing how many people are appropriate for diversion is a first step toward understanding the types of programs, staff and funding that would be needed to treat those individuals in the community,” the study’s lead author, RAND behavioral scientist Stephanie Brooks, said.

RAND’s findings echoed those of ODR, whose own recent research concluded 56 percent of the County jail’s mental health population is eligible for diversion, with an additional 7 percent also potentially eligible.

Since its creation in 2016, ODR has diverted more than 4,400 people from County jails to long-term care and supportive housing, with very low rates of reoffending. Among those placed in the ODR Housing program, 90 percent have remained housed after six months. Diversion programs cost the County about \$70 daily per person, while incarceration costs about \$600 daily per person with serious clinical needs.

“No one can get well in a cell,” said Supervisor Ridley-Thomas, who authored the motion that created ODR. “With diversion, we are creating better outcomes for people and saving County resources -- without compromising public safety.”

“Diversion is also breaking the cycle between jail and homelessness, enabling those with mental health disorders to get treatment instead of the costly alternative of serving additional time behind bars and then being released with no support,” Supervisor Ridley-Thomas added. “RAND’s research underscores the need to double down on diversion to reach all those who could benefit.”

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