New Efforts to Reduce the Number of People with Mental Disorders in Jails Set the Stage for Unprecedented Change

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Dec. 9, 2014—Congressional leaders committed to improving mental health services and public safety joined the National Association of Counties (NACo) and the Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center today for a briefing on the new wave of national efforts to reduce the overwhelming number of people with mental disorders cycling through U.S. jails.

The briefing underscored the bipartisan commitment to prioritize this issue for the 114th Congress, highlighted individual pushes for reform from members of Congress, and introduced a new national initiative emphasizing state-local collaboration and targeted action on the ground level.

“With growing support for addressing the mental health needs of those in the criminal justice system, it’s clear that this is not a Republican issue or a Democrat issue,” said Sen. Cornyn. “It’s a public safety issue.”

NACo and the CSG Justice Center, together with other leaders in behavioral health and criminal justice, announced an unprecedented effort to lower the number of people with mental disorders in jails by improving access to effective mental health and co-occurring substance use treatment, strengthening criminal justice collaborations with behavioral health stakeholders, and advancing public safety goals.

“Counties are working to reduce the number of people with behavioral health and substance abuse needs in jails across the country,” said NACo Executive Director Matthew Chase. “This cutting-edge initiative will help counties focus on results and take their efforts to the next level. It will support action-oriented, comprehensive strategies to provide needed services in appropriate settings.”

The problem is clear: Jails in this country have replaced in-patient mental health facilities as the largest institutional treatment provider for adults with mental disorders. Each year, more than 2 million people with serious mental disorders are booked into jails, as well as millions more coping with less serious mental disorders that jails are required to address. The majority of these individuals also have co-occurring substance use disorders, increasing their chances of staying longer in jail and being reincarcerated following their release.

“This is a moral issue and an economics issue. When we use our jails to warehouse people with mental illnesses, we burden the judicial system, the public health system, our law enforcement offices, and the taxpayers,” Sen. Franken said. “In confronting this problem, we know that some of the most innovative solutions come from our local communities. It’s our job to make sure they’re properly supported.”

The centerpiece of the initiative is a “Call to Action,” in which county leaders commit to a concrete, multi-step planning and implementation process that is supported by state policymakers, behavioral health and criminal justice practitioners, and other stakeholders to help achieve measurable results. The Call to Action will be launched in spring 2015.

Technical assistance will be provided to help counties carry out the following activities:

1. **Engage a team** of county leaders and decision makers from multiple agencies to reduce the number of people with mental disorders in jails that do not pose a public safety risk.

2. **Obtain prevalence numbers and assess needs** to better identify adults entering jails with mental disorders and their recidivism risk, and use that baseline information to guide decision making.
3. **Measure treatment and service capacity** to determine which policies, programs, and services may be able to minimize individuals’ contact or deeper involvement in the criminal justice system.

4. **Make a plan with measurable outcomes** that draws on the assessment of the jail population and community capacity.

5. **Implement research-based approaches** to carry out the plan, including both short- and long-term tasks that working groups can complete for the leadership team.

6. **Track progress** using data or information systems and report on successes.

Lisa Clements, Colorado’s commissioner of the Office of Behavioral Health and a CSG Justice Center board member, added, “This initiative is about increasing public safety and promoting recovery among people with behavioral health disorders. Success depends on our ability to connect those people to the right services and supports in the community.”

As part of the initiative, NACo and the CSG Justice Center will also hold a national summit to convene leadership teams from across the country to advance the work of counties that have well-developed plans. These counties will be positioned to be drivers of a peer-learning community.

“Jails should not be de facto mental health treatment facilities, and using them this way does not improve public safety,” said Sheriff Susan Pamerleau of Bexar County (San Antonio), TX, and a representative of the Major County Sheriffs’ Association. “There are better ways to address this national issue to ultimately reduce costs, improve lives and provide hope.”

“Individuals with mental illnesses and their family members have suffered greatly from the cuts in mental health services and the corresponding increase in the incarceration of members of our community in jails and prisons,” said Mary Gilberti, executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). “The criminalization of mental illness is inhumane and should shock the conscience of the nation. This partnership is an important beginning for the widespread reform needed.”

“We know more now than ever before what types of approaches can advance both recovery and recidivism-reduction goals,” said Denise O’Donnell, director of the U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance. “The proposed initiative will leverage a broad range of strategies that improve diversion, community-based treatment, crisis intervention by police, specialty courts and supervision caseloads, reentry planning and other approaches that can be taken to the next level.”

Among the key partners for this effort are NAMI, the Major County Sheriffs’ Association, National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors, National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors, National Council for Behavioral Health, National Sheriffs’ Association, and Policy Research Associates. In addition, a broad coalition of national experts and organizations representing key stakeholders will be engaged to support the initiative.

“Despite drastic cuts to mental health services across the nation, I know that there is much that state mental health directors can achieve in partnership with county officials and stakeholder groups,” said Lorrie Rickman-Jones, senior policy advisor in Behavioral Health for Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn and a CSG Justice Center board member. “And with this collection of impressive organizations collaborating on this effort, we’re in a unique position to make a true impact.”


###