

Although much of the media focuses on large and urban counties, rural counties across the United States are also struggling with how to address jail overcrowding and the incarceration of individuals with behavioral health conditions. In many ways, rural counties often face even tougher challenges

meeting the needs of this population due to lack of resources and large geographic regions to cover. Even when money is available to provide treatment and services, it is still challenging to set up programs in very rural areas. It is not uncommon for county residents to travel long distances to access behavioral health services.

Rural counties have developed innovative strategies to respond to and meet the needs of people with behavioral health disorders who are involved in the criminal justice system, including mobile crisis teams, telepsychiatry and more. Many have set up regional partnerships to share resources to provide services. But we are still not reaching everyone who needs help and more individuals are entering the criminal justice system who could be better served through the behavioral health system.

As President of the National Association of Rural Mental Health (NARMH), I would like to formally endorse, on behalf of the NARMH Board, Stepping Up, a national initiative started by the National Association of Counties, the Council of State Governments Justice Center and the American Psychiatric Association Foundation to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in jails. Stepping Up is a national effort led by American counties to change the way we respond to individuals with mental illnesses and substance use disorders in a more humane and cost-effective manner. It involves all levels of county government, from elected county officials such as commissioners, sheriffs and prosecutors to county behavioral health providers and county staff. Stepping Up is a new resource for rural counties to find out what works, to learn how to plan and implement successful strategies and to engage with peers in other rural counties.

The NARMH Board would like to encourage all rural county behavioral health agencies across the United States to talk with their local county elected officials about joining their fellow counties in this important initiative. The first step in any initiative is talking to each other, and the resources available through Stepping Up provide tools for beginning the discussion locally. Find out more at www.StepUpTogether.org.

Together we can help reduce the criminalization of people with behavioral health needs in our rural communities and nationwide.

Sincerely,

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