



Despite our size, rural counties encounter the same obstacles and challenges as do larger, urban counties when faced with the growing numbers of people with mental illnesses involved in our criminal justice systems as larger systems, but we must do it with fewer resources. Jails across the country – big and small – are frequently being utilized as mental health hospitals. In rural counties, this challenge is even more pronounced as the availability of appropriate mental health services is frequently sparse or in some cases non-existent, leaving our jail as the only option for stabilizing a person experiencing a mental health crisis. Even when there is funding available for these services in the community, it can still be difficult to find individuals to provide them!

Mental Health services in Wyoming remain sparse and inadequate, with many areas lacking psychiatric care and reasonable access to needed services and supports. In Laramie County, as well as around the State of Wyoming, the jail operates as a de facto mental health facility, dealing with a disproportionately high number of offenders with mental illness, substance abuse issues and often both.

In the rare cases where a rural county has mental health services, frequently the county is so geographically big or the services so far away that it may take hours to access them. As law enforcement is typically the first responder during a mental health crisis, having to transport an individual to a center or hospital where he or she can receive services can take hours, during which the officer is no longer on the street to address other calls for service.

A number of innovations have been helping rural sheriffs to meet some of these challenges. Many rural sheriffs have implemented Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT) into their departments. CIT is a program to train officers in how to more appropriately and effectively respond to people with mental illnesses in order to deescalate situations and better connect individuals with services rather than arresting them. CIT has been shown to increase the safety of individuals experiencing a mental health crisis and of officers responding to calls. It also helps to reduce jail and emergency department admissions by resolving the issue on site.

In addition, many rural counties and regions are now operating mobile crisis teams or co-responder programs. These programs partner mental health professionals with law enforcement to respond to calls for service involving people with mental illnesses. These teams are frequently able to help address the crisis in the home, reducing the need to take an individual to jail or an emergency department.

Currently Laramie County, along with six other counties in the state, has CIT programs which work closely with local hospitals and mental health agencies to find an appropriate course of action.

None of these resources and programs can be started without supportive and collaborative relationships between our county leaders and behavioral health and law enforcement stakeholders. The National Sheriffs' Association is proud to partner with NACo, the Council of State Governments Justice Center, the American Psychiatric Association Foundation and their partners to support the Stepping Up initiative. I encourage all of our members – from small, rural counties to large, urban counties – to engage with their county leaders on this important and timely issue.

Respectfully,

Sheriff Danny Glick
NSA President

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Danny Glick".