STEPPING UP: A National Initiative to Reduce the Number of People with Mental Illnesses in Jails

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN NEWS OF JAILS serving more people with mental illnesses than in-patient treatment facilities in their county was shocking. Now, it is not surprising to hear that counties across the nation routinely provide services to the estimated 2 million people with serious mental illnesses booked into jail each year, or that prevalence rates of serious mental illnesses in jails are three to six times higher than for the general population.1 Almost three-quarters of these adults have co-occurring substance use disorders.2 Once incarcerated, they tend to stay longer in jail and upon release are at a higher risk of recidivism than individuals without these disorders.3 The human toll of this problem—and its cost to taxpayers—is staggering. Jails spend two to three times more on adults with mental illnesses that require intervention compared to those without those needs,3 yet often cannot achieve recovery and recidivism-reduction goals. Despite counties’ tremendous efforts to address this problem, they are often thwarted by significant obstacles, including coordinating multiple systems, balancing political agendas, and operating with minimal resources. Consequently, large numbers of people with mental illnesses continue to cycle through the criminal justice system, often resulting in tragic outcomes for these individuals and their families, missed opportunities for linkage to treatment, inefficient use of funding, and failure to improve public safety.

The National Initiative

Recognizing the critical role local and state officials play in supporting change, the National Association of Counties (NACo) and the Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center will lead an unprecedented national initiative to help advance counties’ efforts to reduce the number of adults with mental and co-occurring substance use disorders in jails. There are many innovative and evidence-based practices already being implemented across the country. To build on that strong foundation and bring these efforts to scale, NACo and the CSG Justice Center plan to engage partner organizations with expertise in the complex issues at stake, including those representing sheriffs, jail administrators, judges, community corrections professionals and treatment providers, consumers, advocates, mental health and drug abuse service directors, and other stakeholders. What distinguishes this initiative is the coordination of state and local leaders to bring about system changes based on data-driven strategies.

The initiative has three key components:

1. A CALL TO ACTION demonstrating strong county and state leadership and a shared commitment to a multi-step planning process that can achieve concrete results for jails in counties of all sizes.

The Call to Action is more than a vague promise for reform; it focuses on developing an actionable plan that can be used to achieve county and state system changes. As part of this Call to Action, county elected officials will work with other leaders (e.g., the sheriff, district attorney, and state policymaker), people with mental illnesses and their advocates, and other stakeholders on the following six actions:

- Convene/Draw a team of county leaders and decision makers from multiple agencies committed to reducing the number of people with mental illnesses in jails that do not pose a public safety risk.
- Obtain prevalence numbers and assess needs to better identify adults entering jails with mental illnesses and their recidivism risk, and use that baseline information to guide decision making.

*Although there is a high prevalence of substance use disorders in jails, this initiative initially focuses on people with mental illnesses and those with co-occurring substance use disorders.
• **Measure treatment and service capacity** to determine which policies, programs, and services are available to minimize contact or deeper involvement in the justice system for individuals with mental illnesses.

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

• **Implement research-based approaches** that advance the plan and ensure that working groups or individuals with assignments feel supported, but also accountable, to the leadership team.

• **Track progress** using data and information systems, and report on successes.

NACo and the CSG Justice Center will work with initiative partners to integrate and maximize their existing resources to assist counties, as well as coordinate outreach to media and demonstrate a groundswell to both policymakers and practitioners. Among the key partners are the Major County Sheriffs’ Association; National Alliance on Mental Illness; National Association of County Behavioral Health & Developmental Disability Directors; 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.

2. **TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE (TA)** to counties and policymakers at all levels of government that facilitates Call-to-Action planning and implementation efforts to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses and co-occurring substance use disorders in jails.

NACo and the CSG Justice Center will work with partners to provide an online toolkit keyed to the six actions, distance-learning opportunities, peer-to-peer exchanges, and, for a limited number of counties, more in-depth TA. There will be a self-assessment checklist to ensure that assistance is aligned with how much progress a county has already made and a planning template to help county teams develop data-driven strategies that are tailored to local needs.

3. **A NATIONAL SUMMIT** of teams of county leaders and stakeholders to advance implementation plans.

In partnership with the American Psychiatric Foundation, a summit will be convened that includes teams from counties that have well-developed, prevalence-reduction plans and meet objective criteria for participation. Team members will be high-level stakeholders from multiple systems and will represent counties of various sizes and geographic locations. The summit will help counties advance their plans and measure progress, and foster a core group poised to lead others in their states and regions. People with mental illnesses and their advocates will be engaged, as will state officials and subject-matter experts.

Although much of the initiative focuses on county efforts, states will be engaged in the partnership at every step to ensure that their legislative mandates, policies, and resource-allocation decisions do not create barriers to lowering the number of people with mental illnesses in jails. The initiative will align state and local efforts and include activities that state officials and other stakeholders can engage in to complement counties’ work.

**Additional activities will be explored as the initiative progresses that** focus on the replication of lessons learned, developing and supporting leaders, and expanding learning communities. For more information about NACo, go to [naco.org](http://naco.org) and for more on the initiative, go to [csgjusticecenter.org/mental-health/county-improvement-project/stepping-up](http://csgjusticecenter.org/mental-health/county-improvement-project/stepping-up).

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**Endnotes**

