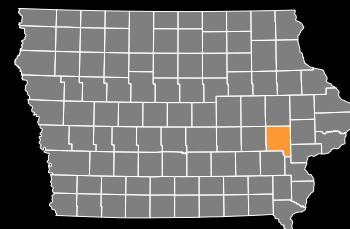JOHNSON COUNTY, IOWA

Using Data to Tell the Story of People with Mental Illnesses in the Community and in the Jail

POPULATION:
130,882

Johnson County has been working on jail diversion since 2005 and has seen dramatic reductions in its jail population due to the foundation leaders created through the Criminal Justice Coordinating Committee (CJCC) and other efforts. Johnson County's CJCC engages county and city leadership from law enforcement, behavioral health and the courts, as well as state leadership to help drive changes. CJCC members have participated in Sequential Intercept Mapping to identify areas where the county needs improvement, and the Johnson County Sheriff's Office (JCSO), in partnership with other local law enforcement agencies, offers Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training to law enforcement officers. The county also provides mobile crisis services and jail diversion programs through a partnership between the JCSO and behavioral health department.

One way leaders have continued the momentum and changed the community dialogue around these issues is by using data to help tell the story of the individuals they are trying to help and the potential impact of making changes to policies and programs. Like many counties, Johnson County has limited information technology or funding capacity to develop its own integrated database where criminal justice data from various agencies and other social service information can be included in one place for easy analysis and sharing. Instead, county agencies have historically had to rely on manual data collection and analysis to inform their efforts.

Manual Data Collection and Cross-Systems Analysis

One way that Johnson County used data was to gain support for a Housing First initiative. In 2014, the executive director of the local homeless shelter, working with the jail alternatives administrator at the JCSO, the Iowa City Police Department and leaders from other public and private organizations, started an initiative to better understand cross-systems service utilization patterns of members of the community known to be chronically homeless and high utilizers of the county jail, hospitals and human services. An Iowa City law enforcement officer manually collected public information on law enforcement contacts with individuals known to be chronically homeless and then shared this information with other public health and human services organizations and agencies such as emergency departments, substance abuse treatment programs, the homeless shelter, emergency services and others. From the original list of 26 identified individuals with the highest number of police interactions, four agreed to sign the necessary release forms and participate in an analysis of cross-systems service utilization.

Data from the various provider agencies existed, but it was stored in silos with no method to electronically share and integrate the information, so research and analysis had to be done manually, which took many months and countless hours. However, by following the data, the team uncovered the stories of these four individuals over a four-and-a-half-year

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period, each of whom repeatedly cycled through existing services (criminal justice, medical and mental health services, substance abuse treatment, legal services and housing and case management), only to return to living on the street; each time in worse health than before. The partners estimated a total cost to the community of over $2.16 million (with an average annual per person cost to the community of $140,000). Since the fall of 2014 two of the four individuals studied have died while living on the streets of Johnson County.

Using this data and the experience of communities in other areas of the country, the team has made the case for the paradigm shift to Housing First—a permanent housing solution for people who are chronically homeless with high cross-systems service utilization—an intervention that is proven to save both money and lives. **Land has been acquired, local and state funds have been secured and construction will begin later this year on a facility containing 24 one-bedroom rental units that will be made available through a Housing First approach.**

Moving Toward a More Efficient Process

The county joined the Stepping Up and Data-Driven Justice initiatives in 2016 to help further its data capacity and increase opportunities to address some of the highest utilizers of justice and human services systems. The jail alternatives administrator and other CJCC members are currently working on fully integrating all county and city criminal justice, public health and social services data into the data-sharing platform OpenLattice to increase administrative efficiency, quickly identify some of the highest utilizers of their systems and divert and deflect people from the criminal justice system to more appropriate services and interventions.

To get started with the platform, county leaders first had to identify designated staff to work on the project without additional funding and quickly realized the importance of having local subject-matter expertise on data collection and technology. Project leaders held conversations with partners demonstrating the benefits of utilizing the data sharing platform. The platform developers provided technical assistance on using the technology and shared details on the confidentiality, data safety and compliance measures taken to ensure privacy of the individuals within the system. Work is currently underway to populate the system with data from various agencies and to change local provider consent forms to allow for new data to be shared through the platform even if historical data cannot be accessed. Project leads continue to work with community partners to overcome real and perceived barriers to data sharing by reviewing the rules on how data is already being shared at the local and state level and by utilizing the public information already in the system to demonstrate the value and benefits of including various data sets.

The goal is that this platform and process will provide county leaders with a system-wide perspective, the potential to measure system-wide performance and the opportunity to enhance their ability to conduct research that will lead to new policy and program recommendations and initiatives.