

County Elected Officials' Guide to the
Six Questions County Leaders Need to Ask



An estimated two million annual jail admissions involve people with serious mental illnesses. Over the past decade, county leaders, police, judges, corrections administrators, public defenders, prosecutors, community-based service providers and advocates have mobilized to better respond to people experiencing mental health crisis. *Stepping Up: A National Initiative to Reduce the Number of People with Mental Illnesses in Jails* was launched in May 2015 to provide counties with the resources to further address this issue.

In January 2017, *Stepping Up* released *Reducing the Number of People with Mental Illnesses in Jail: Six Questions County Leaders Need to Ask (Six Questions)*, a report intended to help county leaders determine to what extent their county's efforts will have a system-level impact that not only results in fewer people with mental illnesses in jail but also does so in a way that increases public safety, applies resources most effectively and puts more people on a path to recovery.

This guide is designed to complement the *Six Questions* report by providing context around the importance of each of the six questions and suggesting questions for county elected officials to ask of key stakeholders in their county. To assess their community's efforts to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in jail, county leaders should ask the following questions:

Question 1

Is Our Leadership Committed?

Reducing the number of adults with mental illnesses in jails requires a cross-system, collaborative approach involving a system-wide planning team. Planning teams may already exist in the form of a criminal justice coordinating council or mental health task force, or your county may decide to create a new planning team. Planning teams should include, at a minimum, county elected officials such as commissioners or supervisors, criminal justice and behavioral health leaders, representatives from the courts, law enforcement, people with mental illnesses or their family members and other relevant community stakeholders. Designating a person to coordinate the planning team's meetings and activities and to manage details will push the initiative plans forward. In addition, an elected official should be designated as the planning team chairperson, as strong leadership from elected officials is essential to rally county agencies in these efforts.

Suggested Questions

These questions should be targeted at members of your county board:

- Has our county board passed a Stepping Up resolution or other mandate to address this issue?
- Do we have a representative planning team to carry out the mandate?
- Have planning team members signed formal agreements to participate in the initiative?
- Do we have a designated planning team chairperson?
- Do we have a designated project coordinator?

Question 2

Do We Conduct Timely Screening and Assessments?

Counties should have a clear process for accurately identifying people with mental illnesses coming into the jail. This requires screening every person booked into jail for mental illnesses, as well as for other behavioral health needs such as substance use disorders. Jails should also screen individuals for pretrial and criminogenic risks to help determine release and supervision strategies. People who screen positive for symptoms of mental illness should be referred to a follow-up clinical assessment by a licensed mental health professional. Ideally, these clinical assessment results will be recorded in a database or spreadsheet that can be queried. Having accurate information on individuals' risks and needs will assist with referrals to mental health treatment while they are in the jail and connections to services when they are released. Having the ability to store and query this information using system-wide definitions of mental illness and serious mental illness will assist with county planning efforts.

Suggested Questions

These questions should be targeted at your sheriff or jail administrator, potentially in conjunction with the jail's behavioral health provider and community service providers, as well as information technology staff within those agencies:

- Do we have system-wide definitions of mental illness, serious mental illness and substance use disorders?
- Do we use validated screening tools for mental illness and substance use disorders in our jail?
- Do individuals who screen positive for symptoms of mental illnesses and/or substance use disorders in the jail receive timely follow-up clinical assessments by a licensed mental health professional?
- Do we have validated screening tools for pretrial and criminogenic risks?
- Do we have mechanisms for storing screening and assessment information?
- Do we have mechanisms for sharing this information with key stakeholders?

Question 3

Do We Have Baseline Data?

Baseline data highlight where some of the best opportunities exist to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in the jail and provide benchmarks against which progress can be measured. The following four key measures are important indicators for counties to track and can help structure county efforts to address these challenges:

- The number of people with mental illnesses booked into jail
- Their average length of stay
- The percentage of people with mental illnesses connected to treatment; and
- Their recidivism rates.

Counties may consider comparing these four key measures to those of the general population in the jail to identify disparities. These comparisons can be especially useful when data on both populations are disaggregated further by charge type, criminogenic risk level, race, gender or other demographic factors.

Suggested Questions

These questions should be targeted at your sheriff or jail administrator, potentially in conjunction with the jail's behavioral health provider and community service providers, as well as information technology staff within those agencies:

- Can our jail disaggregate jail records by mental health status?
- Do we know the prevalence of people with mental illnesses and/or serious mental illnesses in jail?
- Is our jail tracking the number of people with mental illnesses booked into the jail?
- Is our jail tracking the length of stay for people with mental illnesses in the jail?
- Is our jail tracking connections to treatment for people with mental illnesses in the jail and for people with mental illnesses who are released into the community?
- Do we have a system-wide definition of recidivism?
- Do we collect data on recidivism for people with mental illnesses based on our definition?
- Do we produce and share routine reports on the four key measures?

Question 4

Have We Conducted a Comprehensive Process Analysis and Inventory of Services?

An opportunity exists at every step along the criminal justice continuum to improve responses to a person's mental health needs. Completing a comprehensive process analysis helps county leaders determine where improvements can be made to better identify needs and share information. Some counties choose to conduct an initial analysis through a system mapping exercise. It is important that an inventory of community-based services and supports also be conducted as part of this process, and data to support this analysis should be included at all possible points. For example, knowing the current number of people who have mental illness who are booked into jail helps county leaders determine the scale of the problem they are working to address and can be used to compare arrest rates of people who have mental illness to people who do not.

Suggested Questions

These questions should be targeted at the chairperson and project coordinator of your planning team:

- Have we conducted a detailed process analysis of our criminal justice and behavioral health systems?
- Have we identified existing evidence-based programs and practices in our community?
- Have we identified service capacity and gaps for treating people with mental illnesses?

Question 5

Have We Prioritized Policy, Practice and Funding Improvements?

Counties should prioritize policies and processes that will impact one or more of the four key measures listed above. County leaders should provide guidance to the planning team on how to make policy recommendations and budget requests that are practical, concrete and aligned with the fiscal realities and budget process of the county. Any budget proposal should identify external funding streams including federal programs such as Medicaid, federal grant opportunities and state block grant dollars as the first source for funding, with any potential county dollars filling final gaps in needed funding. Routine communication with the planning team on its ongoing efforts will help county leaders stay up to speed on the latest developments.

Suggested Questions

These questions should be targeted at the chairperson of your planning team:

- Have we prioritized strategies based on the process analysis?
- Has the planning team developed a detailed description of needs?
- Do we have estimates/projections of the impact of the new strategies?
- Do we have estimates/projections of the costs associated with implementing these strategies and suggested external funding streams for covering these costs?
- Do we have a description of gaps in funding best met through county investment?

Question 6

Do We Track Progress?

Once planning is completed and the prioritized strategies are being implemented, tracking progress and ongoing evaluation begins. Planning teams should monitor the completion of short-term, intermediate and long-term goals, as it may take years to demonstrate measurable reductions in jail populations and the prevalence of people with mental illnesses in jail. Showing evidence of more immediate accomplishments such as the implementation of new data-driven, system-level procedures and policies and evidence-based practices contributes to the momentum and commitment necessary to ensure this is a permanent initiative. Tracking data within the four key measures may also provide the justification necessary to secure continuation funding and/or additional implementation funding.

Suggested Questions

These questions should be targeted at the chairperson of your planning team, as well as information technology staff within key criminal justice and behavioral health agencies:

- Do we have a process for tracking and reporting on progress on the four key measures?
- Do we have a process for reporting progress toward prioritized strategies?
- Do we have a process in place for ongoing evaluation of implementation and impact?

To access the full *Six Questions* report and find additional resources about how to start and implement an effective initiative to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in your jail, please visit www.StepUpTogether.org.

