

# Special Topics

## Communicating About Efforts to Reduce the Number of People with Mental Illnesses in Jails

### CASE STUDY

**Alamance County, N.C.**  
Population: 151,131



**Stepping Up** is a national initiative to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in jails and is a partnership between the National Association of Counties, The Council of State Governments Justice Center and the American Psychiatric Association Foundation. Stepping Up hosts regularly scheduled webinars featuring topics to help counties' planning efforts. The Stepping Up Special Topics Case Studies serve as a quick reference to the counties highlighted in some of these webinars. Webinar recordings featuring these counties are available on the **Stepping Up Resources Toolkit**.

### Background

Alamance County is a diverse county with both rural and urban features in north central North Carolina. County leaders have advocated for many years for better systems of care for people with mental illnesses who frequently cycle in and out of the justice system, contributing to high jail costs and recidivism rates. In 2015, the county board passed the Stepping Up resolution to guide its efforts to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in jail. As part of their Stepping Up initiative, Alamance County leaders established a mission statement, created two part-time coordinator positions and formed a task force, a leadership team and several associated committees to help create a strategic plan that prioritized community engagement.

### Communications and Engagement Strategies

The leadership team started by creating a mission statement outlining the county's intentions and sharing this with the broader community, which helped spark a dialogue around respecting and caring for residents with mental illnesses. With the support and engagement of agencies such as health, social services and law enforcement, the county hosted a "Community Dialogue" event to kickstart its Stepping Up efforts. Event participants engaged in a process mapping exercise to identify gaps in the system that was then used to pinpoint priorities for the county. Having the community involved helped to solidify buy-in for the efforts and ensure ongoing involvement and support.

Local leaders continue to update the community on the county's Stepping Up efforts through public events, the media and county board meeting reports. In 2017, the county's IT department created a webpage that highlights the mission statement, events and other information that showcases Alamance County's Stepping Up efforts.

In May 2018, the county participated in the national Stepping Up Day of Action by holding a public event to showcase its work. The event included both state and local leaders, as well as individuals who have personal experiences with mental illness. County leaders have also promoted these efforts to state and national organizations and have participated in peer-learning opportunities to network with other counties engaged in this work. The speaking engagements have created a platform for county leaders to communicate their efforts and connect with members of the public who want to learn more or become involved.



In addition to hosting events, the county shared specific stories to humanize this issue. These stories of Alamance County residents with mental illnesses illustrate how they have successfully navigated out of the justice system as a result of their engagement with treatment and programming. County leaders have demonstrated a commitment to sharing the responsibility of reducing the stigma around mental illness and advocating for better resources and outcomes for residents.

## ***Achievements and Impact***

The county has seen significant movement toward its goal of reducing the number of people with mental illnesses in its jail through diversion, screening, assessment, referral and engagement. The county was able to hire two part-time coordinators to execute day-to-day Stepping Up activities and special events, and the Sheriff's Office created a law enforcement and mental health crisis response team for calls for service involving a person experiencing a mental health crisis. In addition, law enforcement officers, command staff and Emergency Medical Services have participated in Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training with the goal of better identifying people experiencing a mental health crisis, resolving calls at the scene or connecting them to crisis services rather than arresting them or transporting them directly to the hospital. Finally, the county aims to create a 24/7 diversion and restoration center to meet the needs of residents experiencing a behavioral health crisis. Having community support and buy-in through strategic communications and engagement has helped to build a broad coalition of individuals that collaborate to address these important challenges.

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