

Mobile Crisis Engagement at the Magisterial District Courts Diverting at Intercept 2

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Human Services Subcommittee (HSS) of the Bucks County Criminal Justice Advisory Board has been working to develop recommendations to address the overcrowding that the Bucks County jail system is currently experiencing. One element that is contributing to overcrowding is an increase in the number of community members appearing in front of magisterial district judges who are experiencing a behavioral health, drug and alcohol, and /or co-occurring challenge. When they engage in criminal behavior it is often directly linked to their behavioral health challenge. The Magisterial District Courts of the criminal justice system are referred to as "Intercept 2" in the "Sequential Intercept Model." This intercept is where individuals would experience their initial court appearances and/or would be sent to their initial incarceration.

This fact suggests that Intercept 2 holds significant potential for jail diversion when the criminal behavior in question is related to an untreated behavioral health

disorder. Specifically, if there was an option available to magisterial district judges that would help the individual connect with treatment, they may be able to avoid incarceration altogether. It is important to note that untreated behavioral health challenges only worsen and can become more entrenched in an individual who is incarcerated due to the lack of resources that the criminal justice systems have access to and thereby their inability to address these challenges. We also know that there is substantial data that shows the cost of treating behavioral health challenges in a jail setting is three times greater than in community-based treatment.

The overall impact of such an option would be three-fold - - to reduce the number of individuals being incarcerated, connect individuals with behavioral health needs to community-based treatment, and introduce a cost saving measure to the Bucks County Criminal Justice system. The solution seemed to be clear -- create a partnership between the Bucks County Human Services system and magisterial district courts. The idea was to develop a program that enabled judges to refer individuals to treatment reducing the need to incarcerate when they felt the criminal behavior was directly related to untreated behavior health challenges.

In that effort, Lenape Valley Foundation, Division of Human Services, Bucks County Department of Mental Health and Developmental Programs, Bucks County Court Administration, and the Bucks County Drug and Alcohol

Commission collaborated and submitted a grant proposal to the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency for a Mobile Engagement Pilot program, which was successfully awarded. The goal was to extend already existing mobile crisis services at Lenape Valley Foundation to provide services to individuals appearing in front of magisterial district courts that could benefit from community-based behavior health treatment and avoid incarceration. As part of this program, one additional mobile crisis team was added three days a week, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and a referral process was developed that could be utilized by the magisterial district judges. When the Mobile Engagement team receives a referral, the first step is to connect with the individual to complete a comprehensive bio-psycho-social assessment that will help the team and individual determine the best course of treatment. The team then facilitates those referrals to the decided treatment option and supports the individual for up to three months to make sure treatment is going well. Then mobile team reports back to the court which made the initial referral. Several information training sessions were held to inform the judges about the process and answer any questions and the Mobile Engagement MDJ Pilot program was officially launched mid-March 2017.

Current barriers that the program faces are related to weekend overnight magisterial district judge court appearances when an individual is appropriate for the

program, yet is not safe to be released on unsecured bail due to the nature of the behavioral health challenge underlying their criminal behavior. The team is problem-solving ways to expedite release from weekend incarceration in an effort to allow for the Mobile Engagement team to start working with the individual as soon as possible. With the understanding, that the sooner an individual is connected to community-based treatment, the more likely it is that they will not commit more crimes and face incarceration again.

To date, the Mobile Engagement MDJ Pilot program has provided services to 28 individuals. Of those, more than half of the individuals are scheduled to successfully complete the program this summer/ early fall. Only two have faced additional charges and/or incarceration. In these early stages of the program, the outcomes seem to point to a positive impact on reducing post-incarceration if the Mobile Engagement team can successfully connect with the individual referred and facilitate successful connections to community-based treatment.