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# New jail diversion program addressing mental health, improving recidivism

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By Lindsey Connell, Reporter

MADISON COUNTY, AL (WAFF) - Improving mental health care is a nationwide issue. Alabama is ranked one of the worst in the country for access to mental health care, according to a new study by [Mental Health America](#).

In Madison County, continued efforts to address the problem head-on are having an impact.

A new diversion program gets low level offenders out of the Madison County jail and gets them appropriate mental health treatment.

Those at the helm of the project say it's a smarter approach to handling mental health.

The jail diversion program is getting them help and trying to keep them from falling back into criminal justice system.

It was launched 90 days ago and it's operated by WellStone. The North Alabama Mental Health Coalition turned to the Huntsville City Council and Madison County Commission for funding help.

"We've been able to take 20 inmates out of the jail who are low level of offenders, not a danger to the community whatsoever. They have a case manager now that's assigned to them that follows them and works with them to get them into treatment but also prevent them from returning back to jail," explained Jeremy Blair, WellStone CEO.

There are two case managers.

"They are able identify people in the jail who are probably better served through mental health rehabilitation and mental health treatment," said Lt. Donny Shaw with the Madison County Sheriff's Office. "They plan on identifying more people to get into this program and to take them and put them back into a functional life in the community around us."

"The goal is to get them out of the jail, get them into treatment, get them into housing that's appropriate. We want to take care of their mental health needs that were probably the reasons why they got into jail in the first place," Blair added.

It's not the only project in the works.

"They're working on programs for the future that will provide a wellness center so that whenever we have contact with someone who is in a mental health crisis and they haven't committed a serious crime, it's just a simple misdemeanor, we can redirect them to that facility that they're trying to bring to Huntsville," Lt. Shaw stated.

As for the diversion program, it's saving the county money.

"The average cost to keep one inmate who is mentally ill is \$70 a day. So you can do the math of how much that's saving each day as we get more inmates out and get them into more appropriate treatment," Blair said.

Speaker Mac McCutcheon got wind of the program and has helped fund the second year.

They hope to grow it and add a third case manager with continued funding from the city and county and also have money for things like medications and housing assistance.

Research shows that 1 in every 5 people will experience a diagnosable behavioral health condition in a given year. In spite of this prevalence, two-thirds of those who need professional help will not receive it.

Blair says the new program has been a community effort.

"The community has come together to raise awareness of the program. We took it to the city council and county commission. They saw the vision for the program and were gracious enough to fund a pilot program to see if the theory would work in application," he added. "We're getting people

on their medications. We're making sure to link them to treatment. It's really about how do we address these issues more appropriately and how do we use our limited dollars wisely."

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