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From: Szabo, Max (DAT)
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Attachments: BHJC Concept Paper.pdf



News from the Office of District Attorney George Gascón

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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DA GASCÓN AND MENTAL HEALTH EXPERTS RELEASE CONCEPT PAPER PROPOSING BEHAVIORAL HEALTH JUSTICE CENTER

SAN FRANCISCO – Today, District Attorney George Gascón and four experts in the field of mental health released a concept paper proposing the development of a new Behavioral Health Justice Center (BHJC) in San Francisco. The proposed BHJC would enhance public safety by providing mental health services designed to interrupt the cycle of homelessness, addiction, and criminal activity.

“Public safety will increasingly be defined by how we manage our growing mental health crisis,” said District Attorney George Gascón. “The failure to effectively treat individuals with mental illness is a leading cause of recidivism, homelessness, and the quality of life crimes that our residents endure without relief. Rehabilitating individuals with mental illness is a public health challenge that the criminal justice system is fundamentally ill-equipped to resolve.”

"DA Gascón's concept paper is a timely and important part of the discussion around how to reduce incarceration and recidivism by addressing our mental illness crisis head on," said Supervisor Campos. "I look forward to the discussion around this paper and other ideas that are aimed at improving public safety and mental health in San Francisco."

“San Francisco will continue to be a leader in criminal justice and behavioral health innovation by investing in mental health,” said Supervisor Cohen. “We are investing in the health of our communities and answering President Obama’s call to address the systemic problem of mass incarceration by effectively serving the needs of our mentally ill residents as well as enhancing public safety for our larger community.”

“With 2 million people with mental illness booked into jails each year, the biggest mental health providers in the country are LA County Jail, Cook County Jail in Chicago, and Rikers Island in New York,” said Supervisor Jane Kim. “I believe that the vision that District Attorney Gascón has presented in this concept paper is exactly the direction we should be taking when it comes to mental health and our existing answer, which has been incarceration. The jail is simply not going to be the San Francisco answer to mental illness.”

San Francisco’s current system of care for the mentally ill suffers from a lack of resources and coordination. All too often, this results in individuals with mental illness who enter the criminal justice system being released from our hospitals and jails without adequate treatment. It is a problem that is growing quickly, with the percentage of county jail inmates requiring psychiatric medication increasing 30 percent since 2009. Currently, between 35 and 40 percent of the 1,300 individuals detained in San Francisco’s county jail receive care from Jail Behavioral Health Services, and 15 percent are treated for a serious mental illness. These individuals are presenting with more severe mental illnesses and more acute symptoms than ever before.

The primary program for individuals with mental illness who need treatment that have come in contact with the criminal justice system is San Francisco’s Behavioral Health Court. It currently runs a 120-day average wait time for a mental health bed. Therefore, only those offenders who commit more serious crimes are in-custody long enough to be transferred to an inpatient treatment facility. The result is that individuals with mental illness are released back onto our streets without receiving the treatment they need, and they often reoffend only to be rereleased under the same circumstances. This is all despite the fact that research shows that incarcerating those with mental illness is counterproductive to their rehabilitation, making it more difficult for them to successfully reenter free society, therefore undermining long-term community safety by increasing recidivism.

According to the Bureau of Justice statistics, 64% of jail inmates across the country have mental health problems (March 2015). Simply adding mental illness treatment services to traditional jails does not adequately address the root problems since correctional facilities are designed for punishment and control, rather than treatment and rehabilitation. Acknowledging this dynamic, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors rejected plans to build a mental health jail in December of last year.

The multi-level tiered system of voluntary care proposed by the BHJC will create a seamless continuum of care in San Francisco and reduce recidivism, thereby making treatment and rehabilitation of individuals with mental illness in our justice system more effective, more efficient, and more humane.

The Concept Paper is attached here.

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