

Burton, Mack: Court can help mental health | Opinion

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Much has been said about our mental health system being broken. Since the 1960s, the conversion of mental health care from state-run institutions to community care did not provide an effective process for connecting care in the community.

This tragic disconnect has sent individuals with behavioral health and substance use disorders through a revolving door of jails, courts and hospitals for decades

But simply dismissing the system as being “broken” distracts from the greater opportunity in front of us. Repeated short-term hospitalization does not work. However, court-ordered outpatient treatment has been effective in reducing hospitalization, incarceration and homelessness.

We have all the components of an effective system: public mental health providers, community mental health providers, hospitals, emergency departments, law enforcement, jails, educators, the courts, mental health advocates and others. People who care deeply. Professionals who are very good at their jobs.

However, these components are disconnected and do not behave as a system. Working together to connect them is the key to creating a more effective mental health system.

Address the revolving door. In Wayne County over the last five years, 16,000 petitions for mental health treatment were filed for 9,000 individuals. And 76 had at least 10 petitions during that time.

Over the last year, those 76 individuals had hundreds of emergency room visits at a cost of nearly \$3.3 million — with 56 visits for one individual alone. In addition, nearly half had been incarcerated at the Wayne County Jail, and none of these individuals appear to have been connected to community treatment.

Now that Michigan has converted its mental health code from an inpatient to an outpatient model, private and public entities will be better able to coordinate care. Assisted outpatient treatment is a less restrictive method of treatment than inpatient psychiatric hospitalization, and is typically court-ordered for persons at risk of harm due to an inability to understand their need for treatment.

The Wayne County Probate Court launched a pilot project in March 2022 under its behavioral health unit and has since initiated widespread use of outpatient treatment in Wayne County, instead of a simple discharge of individuals from hospital ERs.

Working with the partners, as well as the Detroit-Wayne Integrated Health Network, the program focuses on helping “familiar faces” (those with multiple court interactions) by working to engage families and guardians with their loved one’s treatment order.

This is done by holding review hearings at the first sign of noncompliance, employing other services (assertive care treatment or med drop program) through the clinically responsible service providers, handling complex case management through the network, and finding other resources in the community, such as stable housing.

The overall pilot project goals are:

- Saving the county millions of dollars by diverting individuals with mental health issues.

- Ensuring that these individuals receive consistent, effective mental health treatment.
- Serving as a model for the entire state.

Early data on those petitioned 10 or more times from 2015 to 2021 shows 39 out of 76 (51 percent) had been booked into the county jail; highest utilizers had 34 and 31 bookings each; 76 individuals accounted for 224 jail bookings; 76 individuals spent a total of 10,118 days in jail at a cost of \$1.6 million; and 42 out of 76 (55 percent) had guardians.

For "familiar faces" who have been petitioned since the pilot project began, the unit is working with their clinically responsible service provider and the network to ensure they are receiving the services they were ordered to receive.

Also, the court continues to conduct training with outpatient mental health providers, attorneys and crisis stabilization units in Wayne County. The project continues functions that were initially undertaken by the Wayne State University School of Social Work's Center for Behavioral Health and Justice.

This innovative project is already helping hundreds of individuals get the treatment they need to stay in recovery and avoid incarceration, hospitalization and homelessness. The model demonstrates the value of judicial leadership in bringing people together to deliver on providing services for those with mental illness.

Living up to the provisions for connectivity in the revised mental health code will create the opportunity to reduce reliance on hospitalization in addition to the other well established benefits of treatment. To make this work, hospitals, emergency departments, mental health providers, jails and probate courts must collaborate with one another.

By bringing together the many in the community that address mental health issues, we can have the kind of connectivity necessary for a more effective

mental health system that works to remove the stigma of mental illness and ensure the delivery of humane, thoughtful services.

Now it's time to spread the word: this approach is a success.

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