

EDC working to keep mentally ill out of jail



El Dorado County Chief Probation Officer Brian Richart talks mental health. Photo/Susan Wood

By Susan Wood

People who live inside their heads don't thrive inside jail cells.

It can be said they also don't do well getting there – or even within the system that incarcerates them, for that matter.

That's what about 30 stakeholders discovered during a mental health meeting at Lake Tahoe Community College last week to launch Stepping Up. The U.S. initiative is supported by the National Association of Counties, El Dorado included.

The county passed a resolution a few years ago to make it a priority to come up with a plan to deal with this global crisis on a local scale. But nothing much happened. It was an oversight that the county's Chief Probation Officer Brian Richart apologized for.

Richart views the Stepping Up initiative as a way of doing business in keeping the mentally ill out of jail while maintaining the public safety in the community.

“It’s about shifting our way of thinking,” Richart, the facilitator, told the audience made up of mental health professionals, affiliates and family members.

For years, if someone who’s mentally ill made a scene in public, law enforcement was called out to restrain the situation and apprehend the person. Now there’s a protocol to talk the person down and instead show empathy. The goal is to get that person to a safe place other than jail where even the most level-headed citizen may have extreme anxiety.

It seemed like an insurmountable task for law enforcement, but now there’s special training because the risk of doing nothing as the problem increases is just too high.

The Public Policy Institute reported inmates statewide in California prisons numbered 112,300 in 2016. Estimates claim 15 percent of those incarcerated are mentally ill. Nationwide, it’s estimated people with mental illness constitute 2 million inmates.

Most close to the issue agree the matter will only get worse without doing something as the number of homeless correlates with the mentally ill, and the division between the “haves” and “have nots” grows wider.

“Jails are not designed for the mentally ill,” said Jeanne Nelson, president of the National Alliance on Mental Illness in El Dorado County.

Nelson has been frustrated by how long it’s taken to get a plan in place, admitting the county is in a state of “catch up.”

“We need to put a stake in the ground. If work was performed

like this in the private sector, they'd be fired," the former Oracle corporate executive told *Lake Tahoe News*. "We need to catapult this thing forward."

But like a good steward of a cause, she added being hopeful and gratified that the initiative is finally moving. She provided recognition to seeing Patricia Charles-Heathers, the director of the county's Health & Human Services Agency, in attendance.

"It's harder in rural communities because of access (to care)," Charles-Heathers told *LTN* after the May 16 meeting. She expects the problem will worsen with the stifling economy for the poor and disenfranchised.

"But we're on track," she said.

El Dorado County sheriff's Sgt. Michael Yarbrough nodded in agreement. Yarbrough dedicates much of his time to the cause, continuing to spearhead the county sheriff's response through the CIT program. He trains about 10 officers a year on the program that details a special crisis management protocol for **deputies going out on calls** involving the mentally ill.

May is Mental Health Awareness month.

After hearing countless stories from family members, Nelson got NAMI to take the lead on sending a grant opportunity to the county for its consideration. Richart announced the county is applying for \$400,000 with a \$100,000 match from El Dorado to carry the county through the planning process. More should be known in six months. Implementation of guidelines presents another chapter yet to be tackled – one that is sure to take more time and money.

But most would agree failure is not an option with lives at stake.

Just ask Tish Elliott, whose 24-year-old son Ross Collins

suffers from a severe mental illness that's a cross between schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Collins has made his way in and out of the system. About a year ago, he was roughed up and told to shut up when taken into custody by three Mono County sheriff's deputies who jumped on his back, Elliott alleged. He was suicidal at the time.

"It's the reason I moved here. My son was scared," she said. "They treated him horribly and was told to act like a man."

Like clockwork, the hospitalizations were once annual visits. Now they happen about every three months. There's a cycle, a vicious one.

Elliott worries her son has reached the point of no return in respect to ever being able to live a normal life. He told her he paces and screams, so he doesn't hear the voices in his head.

"My heart aches for every NAMI parent," she said wearily. "I'm constantly looking for hope, and I'm hopeful as long as he's stabilized."

She took solace in hearing others' stories and thinks telling hers is therapy. She attended the El Dorado County meeting to achieve both.

The Stepping Up report released in January 2017 outlines six questions county leaders can ask to determine the extent its local government may have on using a system that stems the tide on mental illness – especially with respect to clogging the jails.

The questions:

- Is our leadership committed?
- Do we conduct timely screening and assessments?
- Do we have baseline data?

- Have we conducted a comprehensive process analysis and inventory of services?
- Have we prioritized policy, practice and funding improvements?
- Do we track progress?