

# Young Lawyers



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## ADMITTING THERE'S A PROBLEM: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

I recently attended the 2018 American Bar Association Midyear Meeting in Vancouver, Canada, where I sat through the Criminal Justice Section's Mental Health Committee Meeting. The meeting was spearheaded by Judge Steve Leifman from Miami, Florida. In 2000, Leifman started the Eleventh Judicial Circuit Criminal Mental Health Project in Miami-Dade County, Florida. The goal of the project was to divert mentally ill people who might otherwise end up in the criminal justice system into treatment centers. Listening to Leifman speak passionately about how this program has benefited the citizens of Miami-Dade County made me reflect on how the citizens of Nevada could benefit from implementing a similar type of program in our state.

For starters, the Eleventh Judicial Circuit Criminal Mental Health Project has embraced and promoted the Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training model developed in Memphis, Tennessee.<sup>1</sup> The purpose behind CIT training is to set a standard of excellence for law enforcement officers with respect to the treatment of individuals with mental illnesses. CIT officers perform regular duty assignment as patrol officers, but are also trained to respond to calls involving mental health crises. Officers receive 40 hours of specialized training in psychiatric diagnoses, suicide intervention, substance abuse issues, behavioral de-escalation techniques, the role of the family in the care of a person with mental illness, mental health and substance abuse laws, and local resources for those in crisis.

The training is designed to educate and prepare officers to recognize the signs and symptoms of mental illnesses, and to respond more effectively and appropriately to individuals in crisis. Because police officers are often first

responders to mental health emergencies, it is essential that they know how mental illnesses can impact the behaviors and perceptions of individuals. CIT officers are skilled at de-escalating crises involving people with mental illnesses, while bringing an element of understanding and compassion to these difficult situations. When appropriate, individuals in crisis are assisted in accessing treatment facilities in lieu of being arrested and taken to jail.

In addition to CIT training, the Eleventh Judicial Circuit Criminal Mental Health Project has developed a post-booking diversion program to serve individuals who are booked into jail and awaiting adjudication. The post-booking program diverts nonviolent misdemeanor defendants as well as defendants who have been arrested for less serious felonies, but have serious mental illnesses and possible co-occurring substance use disorders, from the criminal justice system into community-based treatment and support services.

Leifman's new groundbreaking project is to complete the Miami-Dade County Mental Health Diversion Facility, currently under construction. With this new facility they hope to create a comprehensive and coordinated system of care for individuals with serious mental illnesses who are frequent and costly recidivists to the criminal justice system, homeless continuum of care, and acute care medical and mental health treatment systems. The Mental Health Diversion Facility will be housed in a former state psychiatric hospital that was leased to the county.

Once completed, the facility will house a comprehensive array of treatment and support services including screening and assessment, crisis stabilization and detox services, various levels of residential treatment,

substance use and trauma-related treatment services, outpatient behavioral health and primary care treatment, crisis respite services and employment/vocational training services. The facility will also include space for the courts and social service agencies, such as housing providers, legal services and immigration services that will address the comprehensive needs of the individuals served.

By housing a comprehensive array of services and supports in one location, and providing re-entry assistance upon discharge to the community, it is anticipated that many of the barriers and obstacles to navigating traditional community mental health and social services will be eliminated. The services planned for the facility will address critical treatment needs that have gone unmet in the past and reduce the likelihood of recidivism to the justice system, crisis settings and homelessness in the future. The Eleventh Judicial Circuit Criminal Mental Health Project is a creative response to assist individuals who come into the criminal justice system with serious mental health issues. In addition, the Mental Health Diversion Facility, when completed, will be a first-of-its kind facility and, in the future, may serve as the new gold-standard for dealing with this segment of the criminal justice system population.

The Eleventh Judicial Circuit Mental Health Project was featured in the August 2015 issue of *Governing*. You can find the article at [www.governing.com/topics/public-justice-safety/gov-miami-mental-health-jail.html](http://www.governing.com/topics/public-justice-safety/gov-miami-mental-health-jail.html). **NL**

1. CIT training has been implemented in Northern Nevada through the LEO academy; all new officers receive the 40-hour training.