

THE MENTALLY ILL IN OUR JAILS

by Ventura County Supervisor Linda Parks, December 2008

State prisons and county jails are over-crowded. In Ventura County our jails are over capacity by roughly 200 inmates at any given time. There are several factors that contribute to this over-crowding. One factor is court delays which have resulted in the majority of the jail population awaiting sentencing. Additional factors include the District Attorney's policy not to plea bargain, and the three strikes law, both of which have put more criminals behind bars.

Included in the jail population are approximately 200 mentally ill people. Of the 200, females outnumber males by more than 2 to 1. Sheriff Bob Brooks has referred to our County jail as the biggest behavioral health program in the county. Unfortunately, this is true. The jails in Ventura County house more mentally ill people than our hospitals and residential treatment facilities combined.

Common offenses of people with mental illness are public intoxication, trespassing, substance abuse, and theft. Many of these individuals have a drug or alcohol addiction, in addition to a mental illness. This is called a co-occurring disorder and afflicts many people with mental illness.

Jail can be a stressful environment, especially for the mentally ill who can become more ill when scared or threatened. The use of medications to stabilize them in jail may or may not be the same medication prescribed by their personal physicians. Due to confidentiality of medical records it is difficult to coordinate the flow of this kind of information with personal physicians, and after all, jail is not a treatment center. Jail is however, a bit of a revolving door with many inmates serving their time, being released, and then returning to jail again. This is especially true for mentally ill inmates.

Keeping people in jail is expensive. It will cost the County over \$30 million a year to expand the Todd Road Jail, yet there is no doubt that we need to alleviate the over-crowding. Currently it costs \$114 a day to house an inmate at the Todd Road Jail and \$154 a day to hold them at the Pre-Trial Detention Facility. This is more than the cost to go to Harvard.

One little known fact is that people who are incarcerated lose their MediCal and SSI benefits, and some health insurance companies cancel the policies of those who are convicted. Lack of insurance can prevent mentally ill inmates from getting their medication once they're released from prison. This contributes to their higher rates of jail recidivism.

At a time when the Ventura County Board of Supervisors is looking at options for increasing the size of the Todd Road Jail to relieve overcrowding, we need to also look at how to break the cycle that leads so many people back to jail. Re-entry programs are now being considered to help State prisoners re-enter society. Now is also the time to look at programs to provide treatment for the mentally ill with the same goal of helping them to re-enter society as productive citizens.