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### Mental health court more beneficial than incarceration

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Court Liaison

In America, approximately 24% of state prisoners have "a recent history of a mental health condition," according to the Department of Justice. Unfortunately, when those we care about struggle with untreated mental health symptoms, it may often lead to involvement with the criminal justice system. However, thanks to improved understanding about mental health disorders, we are starting to identify a stronger link between a person's mental health status and how it relates to behavioral difficulties. The growing number of incarcerated individuals who suffer with mental health and/or a substance use disorder has resulted in a creative approach to tackle this rising issue: Mental Health Court programs.

What is Mental Health Court? Mental Health

Court is a diversion program that allows individuals who are involved with the law to become connected to mental health treatment and supports in the community. The program aims to reduce the number of legal interactions and psychiatric hospital visits one may otherwise incur, as well as to promote community and individual safety and to educate those who suffer with mental health disorders.

How does someone connect to Mental Health Court? Referrals to Mental Health Court can come from treatment providers, private attorneys, prosecutors, courts and the Public Defender's office. This list is not exhaustive and essentially any person can make a referral if they have a loved one who may be struggling with a mental health disorder and is facing legal consequences. Once the referral is made the court liaison will meet

with the individual in the beginning phase of incarceration and determine a preliminary treatment plan and immediate community supports that the person can be connected with. The individual is then assigned an attorney and the planning process to connect to Mental Health Court and mental health services begins. Each plan is individualized based on the needs of the person incarcerated and the mental health symptoms he or she is experiencing.

Why is Mental Health Court so important? For many, Mental Health Court is the first introduction to mental health treatment. Once an individual is accepted into the diversion program, the process of mental health treatment begins in earnest. The client's responsibilities include showing up for appointments and remaining connected with mental health providers; following

through with the treatment plan; frequent meetings with the court liaison and attending weekly court reviews. In Nashua, these court reviews consist of weekly check-ins with the court liaison and the Judge at the Hillsborough County Superior Courthouse, where a very successful Mental Health Court program has been in operation since 2006. The goal of these reviews is to ensure compliance with mental health services and to hold clients accountable for their responsibilities within the program. This time is used to address any difficulties one may be experiencing getting connected to providers, addressing vocational and educational goals, and supporting individuals to reconnect with needed supports, such as housing and primary health care. Within the last year the Community Connections Mental Health Court program of

Nashua has served over 200 individuals.

Does the program work?

In the role of Court Liaison, I have been fortunate to be involved with so many success stories that unfold within the year a person participates in the program. Not only does the program support individuals by decreasing their frequency of contact with local law enforcement, but it also reduces psychiatric hospitalizations. The Mental Health Court network provides individuals with an increased understanding of the mental health services and supports that exist within their community and provides enhanced connections to social services agencies and other valuable networks. Through this program, I have had the privilege of seeing individuals receive critically needed services,

reap the benefits of appropriate medications, reconnect with families and children, obtain sustainable employment, and even attend graduate school.

One of the most important things Mental Health Court can give many, besides a chance to resolve legal difficulties and receive mental health services, is a sense of hope. Hope that springs from the knowledge that with appropriate support, individual goals can be accomplished and unhealthy behavior patterns can be changed. Mental Health Court provides a unique opportunity for those involved within the criminal justice system to change negative behavior cycles, gain valuable life skills, and begin to move forward with the productive and fulfilling life they can now envision for themselves.

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