

## Elected Officials

### Understand Their Perspective

State legislators and county supervisors tend to be generalists, who regularly juggle dozens of public policy issues. Advocates should be prepared for several concerns these elected officials are likely to have about tackling the issue of people with mental illness in the criminal justice system:

- >> Elected officials may equate mental illness and the criminal justice system as primarily an issue of violent crime or people who use the rare but well-publicized “insanity” defense.
- >> Many politicians are wary of getting involved in criminal justice issues for fear of being labeled “soft on crime.” At first blush, proposals for alternative responses for offenders with mental illness will appear politically risky.
- >> When the political hurdles about public safety are cleared, advocates will usually

face questions about the cost of addressing this issue. Officials with broad responsibility over multiple areas of government are constantly forced to weigh priorities and apportion limited resources.

### Explain Why Addressing the Issue Is in Their Interest

To engage elected officials, advocates should focus on county and state legislators and executives with a history of working on mental health issues, or with a personal connection to the issue. With these and any other elected officials, some of the arguments below may be particularly effective:

- >> **A bipartisan issue**—Advocates should take pains to make clear that people across the political spectrum are concerned about the overrepresentation of people with mental illness in the criminal justice system. Coming to elected



officials hand-in-hand with a bipartisan group of criminal justice and mental health practitioners can help drive this point home.

- >> **Improve public safety**—Making clear that responding to this problem will, along with improving the lives of individuals with mental illness and family members, enhance public safety can ease concerns that elected officials will look “soft on crime.” Again, close collaboration between advocates and criminal justice officials speaks volumes about the importance of public safety.
- >> **Save money**—Advocates should also emphasize that the current way of doing business is costly for all involved, and that improved responses to this population have been shown to make better use of taxpayer dollars.

## Propose an Initiative

Elected officials can be instrumental in supporting advocacy efforts in a number of ways. They can make changes to state laws to facilitate the development of innovative strategies, encourage reticent stakeholders to come to the table, and perhaps most importantly, ensure long-term funding of new programs. In addition, there are some initiatives that elected officials have historically pioneered to address the problem.

- >> **Convene a task force**—Momentum in many counties and states has begun with the formation of a cross-systems task force, convened by a key elected official, which brings together advocates, people with mental illness, and representatives of criminal justice, mental health, and other related systems.
- >> **Provide seed funding**—Some state legislatures have taken leadership by



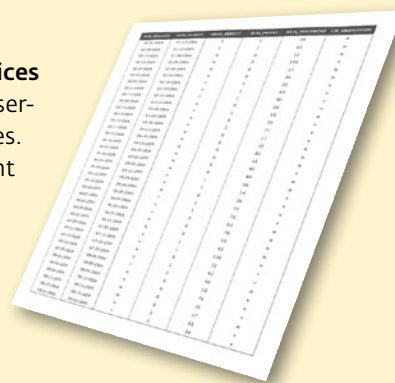
providing grants for communities interested in developing new responses to people with mental illness involved in the criminal justice system.

>> **Analyze the problem**—Especially in times of fiscal crises, the most elected officials may be able to do is commission an analysis of the

problem. Such an analysis may provide data that makes a compelling case to the previously unconvinced that further inaction is irresponsible. Furthermore, such information may demonstrate the positive impact of a pilot project that could be expanded or replicated elsewhere in the state.

**The King County Department of Community and Human Services**

conducted a cross-system examination of the costs of providing services to a group of high utilizers of drug and alcohol acute services. This evaluation included costs associated with jail time, inpatient psychiatric services, substance abuse crisis services, involuntary treatment costs, and emergency room admissions. To minimize information-sharing obstacles, the Mental Health, Chemical Abuse and Dependency Services Division first collected information concerning the use of mental health and substance abuse services under their supervision. The division then asked the jail and local emergency room to provide information that was cross-referenced with the initial list to determine which individuals were utilizing multiple services during a one-year period. Through this evaluation, the county learned that in the course of one year it had spent more than \$1 million on just 20 people, who were repeatedly committed to hospitals for 72 hours, jailed, or put in detoxification facilities.<sup>38</sup>



**38** Courtesy of Patrick Vanzo, Administrator, Cross Systems Integration Efforts, Department of Community and Human Services, King County, WA.

