

Sarasota receives grant for jail diversion project

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Program to keep non-violent offenders with mental health issues out of jail is awarded more than \$1 million.

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In January of 2014, Circuit Court Judge Erika Quartermaine convened a small group of concerned stakeholders to talk about how to address the number of low-level offenders with chronic mental illness issues repeatedly showing up in Sarasota courtrooms.

That meeting became the catalyst to create a program that could divert non-violent offenders with mental health issues from the county jail and provide them with appropriate services and treatment.

On Wednesday, after more than two years of strategizing, collaboration and fundraising, the Comprehensive Treatment Court took a giant step toward becoming a reality when stakeholders learned that the Florida Department of Children and Families had not only awarded Sarasota a \$1.2 million, three-year grant for the creation of a jail diversion program, but ranked its grant proposal first among all those submitted within the state. Money for the Criminal Justice Mental Health and Substance Abuse Reinvestment Grants is anticipated to be dispersed on or shortly after Jan. 1.

“I’m really happy about it,” said Quartermaine, who has remained the key champion for the pilot project. “This has been such a long process. The good thing is that we’ve been preparing so long, we know just what to do. The ranking they gave us is a good indication of how hard we’ve worked and how much we’ve thought about it.”

The grant, which was written and submitted by Centerstone of Florida Inc., the entity that won the bid to provide program services, required matching funds. Those were previously committed by the city of Sarasota and Sarasota County and a consortium of three local charitable nonprofits: the Community Foundation of Sarasota, the Gulf Coast Community Foundation and the Charles and Margery Barancik Foundation. Each entity will provide a third of the match, or approximately \$400,000 over the three years.

Melissa Larkin-Skinner, chief clinical officer at Centerstone, who will become interim CEO when Mary Ruiz retires on Dec. 15, said her organization will begin advertising immediately for the estimated five staff additions that the project will require.

“As soon as we hear the official word from the state we can post the positions we need to fill and hire as quickly as possible,” Larkin-Skinner said. “We can do that before the money comes in.”

The plan

The program aims to divert about 75 to 100 eligible offenders each year, approximately 25 at any one time, to case managers who will connect them with appropriate medication, treatment, housing options and applicable entitlement programs.

Because many of those repeat offenders also are homeless, government and law enforcement leaders believe the program could have a positive impact on a portion of the chronically homeless population who previously have either refused services or struggled to stick with programs.

Quartermaine said her next task will be to facilitate the screening processes that will allow jails to identify eligible individuals quickly and expeditiously channel their information to the courts.

“Then the trick is going to be getting these people to decide to participate,” the judge said, noting the diversion program is not court-mandated. “They may need to be stabilized first. We want to make sure people are going in voluntarily but not lingering in jail if they’re incompetent.”

While the program will not have its own facility, there will be beds available at several different entities to provide short term residential care when necessary, Quartermaine said. Her goal, which she admits may be ambitious, is to service 75 to 100 individuals over the course of the first year.

“It might be hard in terms of the hard core homeless, but I’d love to get at least 75 of them into a more appropriate place than the street,” she added.

Wayne Applebee, the county’s director of homeless services, said he was “ecstatic” about being awarded the grant but cautioned that “there is no one magic solution to the problem of homelessness.”

“We have to be realistic in the numbers,” Applebee said. “Yes, it will certainly help out the population that is visibly homeless, but it is really designed to help 25 people at a time. This is going to help, but it’s not the silver bullet.”

City manager Tom Barwin also applauded the receipt of the grant, but reiterated previous concerns about sustaining the program’s cost and creating the longer-term housing options he believes will play a critical role in achieving lasting positive outcomes. The city, which has adopted a “housing first” philosophy on the issue of homelessness, committed to its share of the matching funds just last May, the last collaborating entity on board.

“We’re absolutely thrilled the grant will be funded,” Barwin said. “But longer term funding remains a vital concern, not only after the grant ends, but as people begin to ‘graduate’ from the program. There has to be long-term housing options available for this to be successful and I think and hope that this grant and pilot program will lead more and more to everyone seeing the vital importance of that element. Nothing will work if we don’t get a roof over people’s heads.”

Quartermaine cautioned that continued diligence, patience, commitment and collaboration would be essential as the jail diversion project moves forward and cautioned that future decisions should be the result of evidence-based results.

“This is a very difficult population to work with, that has been untreated for decades, so we cannot expect miracles right away,” she said. “And this is just a piece of the puzzle, not the whole thing.

“But I think we’ll be able to do it as long as we keep that momentum of cooperation and make sure everyone stays on the same page. The things we have to do to address this problem and the homeless problem need to be based on data-backed processes, not politics.”