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SARASOTA COUNTY

Funding set aside for mental-health diversion court

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Sarasota County will contribute \$442,000 over the next three years to fund a new mental-health diversion court, but whether the plan comes to fruition will depend on whether the city of Sarasota agrees to pay, too.

Circuit Court Judge Erika Quartermaine has asked the county, city and three local non-profit groups to help fund her proposed "Comprehensive Treatment Court," or CTC, to help stem the revolving door of low-level offenders with mental illness through the county jail by connecting them with appropriate mental health organizations for proper treatment.

The County Commission unanimously agreed Wednesday to set aside \$120,000 in its upcoming 2017 budget to help secure and match a Florida Department of Children and Families' Criminal Justice Mental Health Reinvestment Grant, which local officials will apply for in the coming two months.

The Gulf Coast Community and Barancik foundations also have committed \$40,000 each to help match that grant — but their funding is contingent on the city also agreeing to fund the three-year pilot program, Quartermaine told commissioners. The Community Foundation of Sarasota also is considering a similar commitment, likely with the same stipulation, she said.

The foundations' requirements and the county's enthusiastic support of the CTC puts the pressure squarely on the City Commission, which is expected to consider its own \$442,000 commitment to the program on May 16.

"We have the entire community coming together now to address this issue, and now the ball's in your court, city of Sarasota," Commissioner Christine Robinson said. "Time to step up."

The CTC is designed as a judicial mechanism to improve services for nonviolent, low-level offenders suffering from mental illnesses for whom the jail has become the de facto mental health institution, said Quartermaine, a judge for the county's current mental health court. The program would divert about 80 to 120 eligible offenders each year to case managers to help provide appropriate treatment, medication, housing and any applicable entitlement programs.

Because many of those repeat offenders also are homeless, court and law enforcement leaders believe the program likely would have a positive impact on some chronically homeless persons who have either refused services or struggled to stick with previous programs.

"Having seen this population firsthand over eight or nine years, I see people from eight years ago and the only thing that's happened is they've been arrested 50 more times and gotten worse," Quartermaine said. "We need to get to the underlying cause

— being arrested is just a symptom."

But city administrators already have balked at Quartermaine's request.

City manager Tom Barwin contends the city already shoulders a disproportionate share of the financial burden for addressing issues of homelessness and mental health in Sarasota County, citing the roughly \$1 million the city spends annually on homeless outreach teams and support for the Salvation Army shelter, for example.

Quartermaine developed the plan to split costs for the program among the two governments and three foundations after state legislators stripped the total \$1.2 million allocation local lawmakers had sought from the state budget.

If the city won't commit funding to the CTC, it appears the foundations would withdraw their contributions and the program would not have the sufficient matching funding needed to secure the state grant, thereby putting the entire proposal in jeopardy.

It is not clear whether there is any way to renegotiate funding from each of the other contributing partners in that scenario. Quartermaine said she hopes she does not have to address that possibility.

"I'm really optimistic the city is going to see the long-term benefits this program would have for the city and step up to the plate," she said.

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