

County officials learn more about 'model' jail diversion program

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Chaves County Commissioner Dara Dana talked about a recent trip she took to Miami-Dade County, Florida.

It was a trip on behalf of Chaves County and its residents. Dana is also a member of the Jail Diversion Subcommittee of the Chaves County Behavioral Health Council. This group has been looking at how to create a local jail diversion program that would allow people with mental and behavioral problems in the county to receive treatment instead of being incarcerated.

Among unfulfilled community needs is a large and important component: Offering a local, long-term mental health care center. There are many other services and resources available in Roswell and Chaves County. And some of the local gaps are beginning to be filled.

Dana reported during Thursday's county commissioners meeting that she and Hagerman Municipal Court Judge Maria Ordonez, also a member of this county subcommittee, recently attended two days of presentations and went on tours of what has been referred to as the model for such jail diversion programs.

The 11th Judicial Circuit Criminal Mental Health Project was created in 2000 to divert people with serious mental illnesses as well as those with mental health issues along with substance abuse disorders from the criminal justice system there.



A review article titled “Jail Diversion: The Miami Model” concluded that this project has resulted in “substantial, cost-effective gains in the effort to reverse the criminalization of people with mental illnesses.”

The project set out to eliminate unfulfilled needs in services available for these people with what the review described as “more efficient and effective linkages” among them.

Dana also talked further about the experience after the commission meeting. She noted that Chaves County has many of the resources to create its own jail diversion program, but that “connecting all of the pieces is the issue.”

Diversion efforts in Miami-Dade started more than 20 years ago and will soon result in the opening of the Miami Center for Mental Health and Recovery. This seven-story, 181,000-square-foot facility will bring together services that are difficult to access or unavailable elsewhere in that community, according to material explaining the purpose of the facility.

It will have 208 beds to provide services and care to those in the community who are considered “high-cost/high need.” Features include client intake and assessment, crisis stabilization, residential and outpatient treatment, primary care, transitional housing and housing placement, respite care and housing, job skills training classrooms, legal and social services, and a courtroom.

The material also notes that the Miami-Dade jail is Florida’s largest psychiatric institution, with 11,000 people who have mental illnesses being booked into that county jail annually. They are in there mostly for low-level, non-violent offenses and make up 57% of its population.

“The resources are all right there,” Dana said about the center opening soon in Miami.

Dana also mentioned a relatively new location in New Mexico. The Doña Ana Crisis Triage Center in Las Cruces opened in June 2021. It provides help to those amid

mental health or substance abuse crises through services, referrals and peer support in an effort to ensure the people engage in recovery. The staff there give the people exiting the facility a comprehensive discharge plan that allows them to reach out to their local healthcare providers, resources and other agencies.

New Mexico House Bill 373 was introduced during this year's legislative session but was postponed indefinitely, then died. It would have authorized law enforcement to transport individuals in crisis to the nearest crisis triage center for mental health status examinations.

It would have also approved personnel at such centers involuntarily admitting "certain individuals in crisis" and "to provide involuntary treatment to certain individuals in crisis."

Local law enforcement here "has said they won't arrest our way out of homelessness," Dana noted.

While the Miami-Dade and Las Cruces centers are designed to serve much larger communities, another challenge for the subcommittee is how to provide something here but on a smaller scale.

Even here, "It's hard to get resources when they don't know where to go," Dana said.

Chaves County has approximately 65,000 residents while Doña Ana County has more than 220,000 residents. And Miami-Dade is approaching a population of 2.7 million.

"Our vision is smaller than Miami-Dade's but I think it's doable," Dana added.