

Targeted Technical Assistance

REPORT

New Jersey

Summit on *Integrating Mental Healthcare in New Jersey's Criminal Justice System*

December 3, 2003

Delivered by:

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Report of Technical Assistance Activity

- **Site:** East Brunswick, NJ
- **Dates of Activity:** December 3, 2003
- **Type of Assistance Provided:**

Presentation by Tammy Seltzer, Bazelon staff attorney, on discharge planning to ensure that inmates have their benefits and medication and other vital services and supports in place upon release; the cost-effectiveness of ensuring smooth transitions for ex-offenders with mental illnesses; and how to leverage resources for the above programs and services.

- **Specific Topic Areas:** Discharge planning for those being released from jail and prison, and the role of the mental health system, department of corrections, Medicaid, and Social Security Administration in the coordination of benefits.

- **Outcomes Anticipated:**

Without benefits, persons released from correctional facilities with a history of mental illness face many of the same problems that led to their original arrest. Without support either through federal or state programs or from employment, adults will not be able to access housing and will have no resources to meet critical needs. Many will then become homeless. Once homeless, individuals with serious mental disorders are particularly at risk of being victimized or arrested. When policies are adapted to enable these individuals to move off the street and into housing treatment and recovery and include initiatives to access appropriate federal benefits, everyone benefits -- both in the reduced economic and social costs of arrest and prosecution and in the positive outcomes for the individuals, their families and the community.

This summit will mark the third conference that NAMI NEW JERSEY and NJAMHA have organized to recognize the epidemic that is resulting in thousands of adults with mental illness being arrested and sent to jails and prisons as the symptoms of untreated mental illness led to their arrest and incarceration. The previous two conferences were designed to increase awareness of this social, human, and health crisis, and to also educate New Jersey stakeholders about the potential solutions by featuring models from around the nation. The December event will begin a dialogue designed to lead to immediate action in improving the current system, which is costly and ineffective.

Having the Bazelon Center's support of this summit will serve to underscore the importance of the issue and the need to seek alternatives to the criminal justice system for low-level offenders who are mentally ill. The anticipation is that the summit will lead to solutions that are not only cost effective, but also humane for persons whose misdemeanor crimes are the direct results of the symptoms of their illness.

• **Organizational representation and involvement:** This activity brought together representatives from a number of New Jersey agencies and organizations, including:

- Criminal Justice System
- Consumers and family members
- Academic and research community
- Law Enforcement
- Parole System
- Community Corrections
- Juvenile Justice
- Dept. of Corrections
- Elected officials
- Community Mental Health Programs
- Mental Health Organizations
- Alcohol & Drug Programs
- County Administrators
- Division of Mental Health

• **Description of Activity:** Approximately 125 individuals participated in the conference. All participants received copies of Bazelon publications “Finding the Key” and “Building Bridges,” the model benefits law. Tammy presented a detailed workshop on federal benefits—what they are, how people qualify, why they are important for people with serious mental illnesses, and current barriers to accessing these benefits. Tammy also suggested ways the state, counties, and individual facilities could remove barriers and ensure more timely access to federal benefits such as SSI and Medicaid. Of particular interest to the group was the common myth that inmates cannot apply for SSI benefits while incarcerated and how to address the lack of communication or miscommunication between local Social Security offices and correctional facilities.

During the discussion, the New Jersey Department of Corrections announced the kick-off of a program to provide temporary identification for inmates leaving state facilities. Such IDs are critical for obtaining benefits and accessing mental health services. The NJ DOC agreed to provide information about their program to other jurisdictions around the country who are referred by the Bazelon Center. Already, the Bazelon Center referred the Sheriff of Yuma County, Arizona to the NJ DOC for more information about the ID program.

• **Evaluation:** Evaluation forms were distributed to the participants in the all-day training. We have not been provided copies or a summary.