

Senate Hearing

4/22/21

“Behavioral Health and Policing: Interactions and Solutions”

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Fresno County, California

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member and members of the subcommittee. I am honored to appear before you to discuss challenges faced by local governments, communities and families as we work together to respond to those with mental illness. Although there are no simple solutions, we continue to develop and implement initiatives to better serve our communities, including increasing access to mental health treatment; diverting individuals with mental health conditions away from the criminal justice system; and working with mental health professions on training programs to address those with mental health needs.

Increasing numbers of people with mental illnesses are coming into contact with the criminal justice system. Many times, as first responders we do not know that a call for service may involve someone with mental illness until we arrive. These calls can be very dynamic and, in some cases, dangerous. In Fresno County we have had two deputy sheriffs killed in the line of duty by mentally unstable

individuals who had armed themselves. These calls for service often are repeated as we often respond to the same location or the same individual.

All law enforcement agencies in my county book those they arrest into the Fresno County jail. We have three correctional facilities. Our average daily population (ADP) for March 2021 was 2620 inmates. Of that population 97% had been booked on felony charges, only 3% are misdemeanants. For all intents and purposes we are an all felony jail. To put this in perspective this high number of felony cases exist AFTER California passed an initiative in 2014 reducing many felony drug crimes to misdemeanors.

In addition to responding to calls, we are working tirelessly to provide treatment to those inside our correctional facilities. In March 2021, 41% of those in our facilities received psychotropic medication for a mental health disorder.

As we evaluated the system, we learned that many individuals are not receiving care when they are not in custody. A correctional facility is not the best environment to give proper services to those with mental health challenges. No one should have to be in jail to receive mental health services. We worked to form a strategy to improve the continuum of care when individuals leave our facilities. Rather than release these individuals out of the door, we transport

them to a safe location. It should be noted many of these individuals are homeless, so they are taken to a shelter at one of our map points that I will discuss in a moment. These efforts have resulted in strengthening our partnerships, a safer jail release plan and in the long term the goal is to reduce recidivism.

Moreover, most law enforcement leaders I talk to agree that incidents involving mental health crises require more than just a law enforcement response. However, the lines are rarely bright, and in many cases law enforcement response is required to help save lives. Our law enforcement agencies worked with our Department of Behavioral Health who provided us with Crisis Intervention Training. We have established a Crisis Intervention Team comprised of mental health professionals and Emergency Medical Services to respond with law enforcement so that both safety and professional services can be available during interactions with individuals in need of care.

We have also activated a Sequential Intercept Mapping initiative. This is a cross system approach that identifies locations where law enforcement most often comes into contact with those with mental illness. We use the data from this initiative to establish a system that bridges criminal justice and mental health

services and minimizes criminal justice involvement for persons with mental illness. Our action plan includes:

- Creating a county-wide Crisis Intervention Team;
- Increasing treatment of co-occurring disorders; and
- Creating a sobriety center.

We are also focusing on discharge and reentry planning to reduce recidivism, in addition to developing diversion tools.

We want to continue and expand these efforts, but enhanced response to mental health crises will require significant increases in training and personnel. Federal support for this would be helpful, as long as it does not displace core law enforcement support programs.

We should be clear that replacing law enforcement - or defunding the police - would result in more harm to the citizens that we serve. “De-policing” has the same effect. The rule of law is a fundamental principle that must be respected. When laws are broken our citizens expect an effective response - especially when their lives and their homes are threatened.

I began my statements this morning by saying any solutions need cooperative relationships. A multi-disciplinary approach is needed that includes

all stakeholders, mental health professionals, public safety and community-based organizations. I can assure you Senators that law enforcement professionals across the Nation want to be a part of the solution and at your service to provide any additional input you may need as policy is developed.

Thank you.