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Sheriff closes jail to violent mentally ill

By Rick Armon
Beacon Journal staff writer

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Summit County Sheriff Drew Alexander plans to announce Monday that the county jail will no longer accept violent mentally ill and mentally disabled people prisoners. (Paul Tople/Akron Beacon Journal)

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Summit County Sheriff Drew Alexander plans to announce today that the county jail no longer will accept violent mentally ill and mentally disabled people arrested by area police — perhaps becoming the first facility in the country with such a policy.

"We're not going to be a dumping ground anymore for these people," he said.

The sheriff has long complained that housing the mentally ill and disabled in jail is inhumane, and they belong in a mental hospital where they can be better treated.

For years, he has threatened to stop taking such people if they are violent and until they have been treated first. He is following through now after a federally funded review of mental health programming at the jail.

A consultant working through the National Institute of Corrections recommended this month that those people "be

referred to the hospital emergency room or the psychiatric crisis center for evaluation prior to being accepted into the jail."

Alexander, who is active in the National Sheriffs' Association, said he's unaware of any other county with that policy. The association and the National Institute of Corrections couldn't be reached for comment.

Nationwide problem

Mentally ill inmates have been a serious problem for jails across the country and there have been nationwide calls for reform. A 2010 report by the Treatment Advocacy Center and National Sheriffs' Association concluded that mentally ill Ohioans are four times more likely to end up in jail or prison instead of a mental hospital.

Local leaders estimated that about 130 inmates — out of more than 600 — are taking psychotropic drugs for mental illness.

The issue erupted publicly here after the 2006 death of inmate Mark D. McCullough Jr. after a violent struggle with deputies in his cell in the jail's mental-health unit.

Five deputies were indicted. One deputy was found not guilty of a single count of murder after an eight-day trial. Charges against the others, all facing lesser felonies, were dismissed after the not-guilty verdict.

The new county policy extends only to those who are violent, Alexander said. And the county is not refusing to house them, officials added, just requiring that they be treated before they are booked into the jail.

The policy, designed to improve safety for other inmates and staff, is similar to one

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in place that requires people with medical emergencies to be treated at an area hospital first.

"Our intention is not to turn away each and every mentally ill person who commits some kind of crime, especially misdemeanors, and are brought to our jail," jail administrator Gary James said. "The majority get along fine."

The new policy may affect two or three people a week, he estimated.

The change is expected to put pressure on local police departments and create an additional financial burden on communities because they could be responsible for any hospital or treatment bills.

Chiefs respond

The sheriff has met with police chiefs in Akron, Barberton and Cuyahoga Falls, and sent letters late last week to other chiefs to explain the policy.

"I totally understand where Sheriff Alexander is coming from," Barberton Chief Vincent Morber said. "We run a jail ourselves and these folks have needs beyond just being locked up."

He said he doesn't know yet how Barberton will handle the issue.

"I'd like to see the mental health community and the community in general step up and address it," Morber said.

Akron Chief James Nice said it will tie up a lot of time for officers if they take someone to the jail and are turned away. They would have to go to Portage Path Behavioral Health or one of the area hospitals for help, he said.

"I'm hoping that it's not used to turn away people they don't want and it's only truly in extreme situations," Nice said. "I can't have people turned away daily."

Portage Path Behavioral Health and Summit County Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services couldn't be reached for comment.

Alexander said he would like to see more mental health facilities like the former Fallsview, a state-run facility in Cuyahoga Falls that provided residential treatment for the mentally ill. It was closed in the late 1990s.

Nationwide, most psychiatric hospitals operated by states were closed as the emphasis turned toward outpatient treatment for long-term care.

The sheriff said he has considered building a separate mental health facility on jail property.

Separate facility rejected

However, that idea was rejected by the National Institute of Corrections consultant. Margaret Severson, a professor at the University of Kansas School of Welfare, called it too costly.

She toured the county jail and reviewed the mental health programming in January at the request of the sheriff. Her visit was funded through the National Institute of Corrections, which is part of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Her 19-page report — which is complimentary of employees' efforts to improve mental health services — notes that psychiatrists were once available at the jail 40 hours a week, but that's down to 17 hours because of budget cuts.

The waiting list for the psychiatrist is three to five weeks, Severson wrote.

The sheriff said he wants the Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services Board to provide more counseling at the jail.

In addition to recommending treatment first for mentally ill people, Severson suggested doing away with a restraint bed; providing additional mental health and suicide prevention training each year; and better identifying people with mental illness when they arrive at the jail.

Alexander said he has implemented or is implementing the recommendations.

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