



"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has."

MARGARET MEAD

Community Corrections, Mental Health partner for improved services

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Visit Pam Weiseman's Brandermill home and you can't help but notice the one-of-a-kind artwork that adorns her walls. Each piece has a story, and Weiseman, a lover of art, is happy to share.

Particularly eye catching are three cheery, abstract paintings that color her sunroom. They were painted by a relative to help him cope with a mental illness.

"One in five families has someone with a mental illness — what I call a brain disorder — whether it's schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or depression," Weiseman said. "These are illnesses that really impact negatively on a person, their employment and their being able to take care of their own needs."

Weiseman's family member stopped taking his medication because of its adverse side effects, and his illness worsened. It eventually caused him to commit a crime that resulted in a four-month jail sentence. He had never been in trouble with the law before.

Her own family experience inspired Weiseman to become an advocate for people with mental-health issues and their families. She is chairperson of Family Advocacy Creating Education and Services, or FACES, a nonprofit organization that works to increase awareness about mental illness and to dissolve the stigma surrounding it. The organization strives for an understanding that mental illness is biologically based and deserves parity with other illnesses.

"What other kind of illness is there in the world where you have a threat of ending up in jail?" she said.

One of Weiseman's biggest goals is promoting jail diversion programs for mentally ill offenders. She has been a key player in a five-year initiative to improve services for people with mental

illness who enter Chesterfield County's criminal-justice system. The initiative, called Partnership for Change, is focused on developing a coordinated plan to divert individuals with mental-health disorders at the earliest point of intervention. The goal is to prevent them from repeatedly entering the criminal-justice system.

"We had the idea that one of the things we needed to do was to create a plan — a process that would involve all stakeholders — to help all people who have mental illness that end up in the jail," said Dave Mangano, Mental Health Support Services strategic manager for consumer and family affairs. "By some fault of their illness, people with mental-health issues can get caught up in the system. It's a cycle that can happen over and over again."

Fifty-six of 315 inmates in the Chesterfield County Jail were reported to have mental illnesses in October when the most recent Virginia Local and Regional Jails Survey was conducted. Twenty-three of the inmates had bipolar disorder or major depressive disorders, and 18 had anxiety disorder. At Riverside Regional Jail, which houses about half of the county's inmate population, 29 percent of inmates have a known, diagnosed mental illness.

Nationally, 6.4 percent of men and 12.2 percent of women entering U.S. jails have severe mental illnesses, compared to less than 2 percent of the general population.

"A lot of these individuals end up in our jail when they don't need to be," said Kris Bryant, assistant director of Community Corrections Services. "It would be ideal if they could go to a diversion program instead, and we could figure out when Mental Health needs to be involved to interview them and identify their needs."

Mental-health reform has become a major policy issue since the Virginia Tech shootings one year ago. Gov. Timothy M. Kaine earlier this month signed legislation intended to eliminate gaps in the mental-health system. The bills expand the criteria for detaining and ordering treatment for mentally ill people who may be a threat to themselves or others. The legislation also streamlines the process for mental-health workers to notify law enforcement, school officials and families that a person may be in an unstable condition.

The Partnership for Change formed in 2006 when Community Corrections Services was awarded a federal grant to plan better access to mental-health services for adult and juvenile offenders. Since then, stakeholders from all departments and agencies involved have met for regular planning sessions and workshops. Those include representatives from Community Corrections Services, Mental Health Support Services, the Community Criminal Justice Board, the Sheriff's Office, the Police Department, the Juvenile Detention Home and Social Services. The meetings have allowed participants to brainstorm on ways to improve, identify problems and goals, and communicate their department's individual needs with one another.

During a workshop in November, participants developed a cross-systems map that details all points of contact an individual touches from arrest to incarceration, including points of diversion for mental-health referrals and other services. The map is an important first step to improving mental-health services in the jail and the juvenile detention center.

"This gives us a visual of how someone enters our system and where we can have intervention," Mangano said. "We now have a much more complete understanding of the kinds of processes a person goes through and the things we can do to help people with mental-health issues get to the services they need."

Because improving mental-health services will ultimately require more resources and more funds that aren't readily available, Bryant said several ideas for "quick fixes" have been identified that would cost little to no money to implement. These include enhancing collaboration between police officers and mental-health workers, increasing contact with inmates' families and moving pretrial dockets from 11 am to 1 pm to give officers more time to gather information for their cases.

Investing in training for law enforcement is another goal since police officers are often the first point of contact for someone entering the criminal-justice system.

The Police Department is seeking grant funding for a crisis intervention team that would be trained in dealing with mental-health issues. Police officers currently receive eight to 12 hours of training in how to deal with mental-health crises.

"We try to find alternatives so people don't have to go to jail or to a hospital bed," said Capt. Dan Kelly of the Police Department. "We do that a lot and have a close working relationship with Mental Health. But we'd like to get more mental-health training for our officers and give them more tools to help them in these situations.

"We need to get everybody aligned and figure out our functions so that our system for helping people is streamlined. Having this team come together and share what their processes are will make it more effective and efficient."

Long-range fixes include improving booking procedures at the jail so that jail employees recognize when an inmate has a mental illness and needs services. In addition to the jail's full-time medical doctor and nursing staff, there are 10 crisis clinicians from Mental Health Support Services who are on call to provide mental-health evaluations for inmates.

"We have inmates who are arrested that have mental-health issues and we have no way of knowing unless they tell us or someone else tells us," said Capt. Ben Craft of the Sheriff's Office. "We don't know if they're on any medications or if they've previously been receiving mental-health services.

"We don't want an interruption of services just because that person comes into the jail."

For Weiseman, the Partnership for Change is a definite step in the right direction. She hopes one day to see better options for people with mental illnesses who find themselves in the justice system.

"You have to have some place for people to go. You have to have somebody giving information to the judges that this person has a mental-health history," she said. "There's been a shift in

recent years to where jails have become mental-health treatment centers. It's not fair to law enforcement and it's not fair to those people."