

## **Officials urged to aid people with mental health issues**

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CELINA — Mercer County officials have been challenged to “step up” their support for residents suffering mental health issues.

Retired justice Evelyn Lundberg Stratton and Thom Craig, mental health program director for Margaret Clark Morgan Foundation, spoke to about 40 county leaders during Monday’s Stepping Up Initiative meeting. Officials included county commissioners, sheriff’s office representatives, health specialists, church leaders, elected officials, education representatives and other law enforcement representatives.

The program highlighted free programs for those in need. The initiative is not a one-time grant, Stratton said. Monday’s meeting focused on forming horizontal partnerships rather than the vertical relationship between the state and county governments.

“There are some things you can do that don’t cost any money,” she added.

The first program Stratton discussed was a free veterans justice outreach service. County officials said they have not yet used this service. The program provides a specialist to work veterans who’ve been arrested. The program also will connect the veteran to the various Veterans Affairs services, including housing, physical exams and mental health treatment, Stratton said.

“Every judge, every probation officer, every sheriff can call a veterans justice outreach specialist,” she said.

Services can help pinpoint possible causes of mental illness, including traumatic experiences, being exposed to harmful chemicals or brain injuries, all while serving in the armed forces, Stratton said.

Another free program offered is a benefit bank. The online program lists benefits, including food stamps, home heating and children’s medical care, offered to those in poverty. Residents can apply for one or more of the services after completing an online questionnaire, Stratton said. The program is not connected to Medicaid or Medicare.

“The benefit bank has been around for about seven or eight years,” she said, adding not many people know about it. “Part of Stepping Up is to (advertise it).”

Craig noted churches can be an important part of the support system.

“The church is sometimes the first place people go when they’re in distress, and a lot of times pastors know right away when someone is in trouble,” he said. “Sometimes they’re solving those problems without very many tools.”

County leaders also can conduct a mapping study to identify strong and weak communication points, Craig said.

Mercer County Common Pleas Court Judge Jeffery Ingraham noted heroin use may mask an underlying mental health issue.

The Mercer County Sheriff's Office has some programs to meet mental health needs, said chief corrections officer Jodi Lange. A counselor is available to jail inmates for about 24 hours each week, and mental health providers are available to help inmates. The office also conducts medical prescreening at Mercer County Community Hospital, Coldwater.

"That's really been a big help," she said, adding the services can show when a person should be in a health care facility instead of jail.

"Ten years ago, it was very different in Mercer County than it is now," said county prosecutor Matt Fox. "I think there is a lot more collaboration with mental health, the jail and law enforcement. The biggest complaint I had 10 years ago was that the chief of police in a small town would get stuck for 12 hours on prescreening. I think that happens less and less now because of the collaboration."

Stratton said knowing whether mental health conditions are the root of a crime is very important during sentencing and continuing to improve collaboration is vital. She suggested officials meet regularly to keep communication open and improve collaboration.

Stratton also encouraged officials to seek private grants to help pay for programs.