The Problem

Each year there are an estimated two million people with serious mental illnesses admitted to U.S. jails and almost three-quarters of adults with serious mental illnesses in jails have co-occurring substance use disorders. The toll incarceration takes on these individuals and their families, as well as the costs assumed by taxpayers, is staggering. Jails have become de facto in-patient psychiatric facilities across the nation with little impact on public safety. Ohio is no exception, with as many as 30 percent or more of the individuals in jails having mental illnesses.

Ohio Steps Up

Stepping Up is a national initiative to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in jails. The initiative was launched in May 2015 by the Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center, the National Association of Counties, and the American Psychiatric Association Foundation, with support from the U.S. Justice Department’s Bureau of Justice Assistance, to help people with mental illnesses and co-occurring substance use disorders safely stay out of jails and on a path to recovery. The Stepping Up Ohio effort is led by county and state leaders, with support from the CSG Justice Center and is generously funded by Peg’s Foundation.

“The increased involvement of people with mental illness and/or substance use disorders in the criminal justice system is a serious problem. By connecting individuals with clinical treatment and pre-release care coordination services, they are more likely to get well and make positive life changes.”

- Lori Criss, Director, Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services

Getting Started with Stepping Up Ohio

To make this effort a success, Ohio County Commissioners are encouraged to sign up for Stepping Up Ohio and pass a resolution to demonstrate their commitment to reducing the number of people with mental illnesses and co-occurring substance use disorders in jail. This allows them to benefit from Ohio-specific resources. Peg’s Foundation has retained Retired Justice Evelyn Lundberg Stratton to serve as Project Director and Melissa Knopp, Esq., to serve as Project Manager to lead the Ohio efforts.
Make sure your county has signed up to receive Stepping Up announcements at https://stepuptogether.org/take-action. By signing up, your county will receive a link to the Stepping Up toolkit, which includes written planning guides, training webinars, and relevant publications. Drawing on this assistance, counties can create actionable plans to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in jails. All counties will assign a County Coordinator as a contact point.

Our team will visit your county to share resources, policies, and practices to address people with mental illness and substance use disorders in the criminal justice system. The team will help your county prioritize areas to tackle to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in jail. To receive a visit, email Melissa Knopp, Esq., at knoppm@steppingupohio.org.

Stepping Up Ohio participants will have access to resources that provide guidance and updates on learning opportunities, peer exchanges, and other technical assistance. They will also receive a regular newsletter with the latest grants and training information. For more information, please check out the OhioMHAS Stepping Up webpage at: www.mha.ohio.gov/steppingup. Contact Kathy Yokum at kathy.yokum@mha.ohio.gov for further details regarding technical assistance.

Once a year all registered Stepping Up Ohio counties attend a one-day conference that brings state and local leaders from across Ohio, together with partners from the national initiative, to identify strategies to build local capacity and connect with training and technical assistance resources. The 2019 conference will be held November 8 at the Quest Conference Center in Columbus; all registered Stepping Up Ohio Counties will be invited to participate.

To learn more about Stepping Up Ohio and the opportunities available through this initiative, please contact Project Manager Melissa Knopp, Esq., at knoppm@steppingupohio.org.