

Citizens committee planned for detention center

By Andrew Oxford

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Taos County officials estimate 70 percent of the adult detention center's detainees will return to the jail at some point after they are released.

In an effort to curb that recidivism rate, a coalition of substance abuse prevention organizations is forming a citizens advisory committee to address the drug and mental health issues that lead many back through the jail's doors again and again.

The proposal from Recovery Friendly Taos County suggests the committee could help develop a system of care for substance abuse and mental illness among detainees.

"The advisory group is not meant to be radical or a watchdog," said Lawrence Medina, who is helping organize the group. "Do we want to hold them accountable? Yes."

But the priority, he said, is to strategically examine solutions for issues compounding the 84-bed detention center's recidivism rate.

Medina points to San Miguel County, where a citizens advisory committee pushed for greater substance abuse treatment in the jail, including a 16-bed treatment facility.

Organizations such as Inside Out and Tri-County Community Services already operate inside the detention center. But law enforcement and community members alike are calling for greater coordination in addressing recidivism as well as underlying mental health and substance abuse. While many such efforts have focused on improving law enforcement's response to crises involving the mentally ill, there is also a renewed focus on addressing the needs of those already behind bars.

"In jails, you're supposed to lock people up because you want to ensure they appear in court or to protect the public's safety," said Grace Philips, general counsel at the New Mexico Association of Counties.

But detention centers have come to serve other purposes, she said, adding "jails have become mental health facilities."

Philips said it has not only become expensive for county detention centers to serve as the *de facto* safety nets for mental health care, but it is also proven to be an ineffective model for delivering such services.

"We know detention centers are not therapeutic environments," she said. "The more we learn

about pre-trial detention, the more we learn that system is not being used efficiently. There are more people in jail than there need to be.”

Many in county detention centers are there for allegedly violating the terms of their probation, often for drug-related reasons, Philips noted. But detaining those probationers does not address the underlying issues, she added.

“We need to do a much better job of selecting who we incarcerate,” Philips said, adding that including the community in that process is an important step.

“The community in Taos is actually doing a particularly good job of bringing stakeholders together and marshaling resources,” Philips said. She cautioned, though, jails should not become the portals for mental health and substance abuse treatment, but part of a broader system of care.

Formation of the citizens advisory committee coincides with a new nationwide effort promoting better coordination between local detention centers and mental health professionals.

The American Psychiatric Foundation, National Association of Counties and Council on State Governments Justice Center launched an initiative this month encouraging local governments to do much of what the citizens advisory committee proposes.

The Stepping Up Initiative calls on counties to convene or draw on a diverse group of local leaders, collect and review data on the needs of detainees, examine treatment options in the community, develop a plan with measurable outcomes and implement a research-based approach to reduce the number of people with mental illness in jail.

Bernalillo, Sandoval and Santa Fe counties have already signed onto the effort.

A draft of bylaws for the Taos County Detention Center Citizens Advisory Committee states the group would “act as official liaison between the [jail] and the community ... keep informed with respect to policies, programs and conditions ... make relevant information known to the community and to encourage community interest and involvement in the facility ... comment on and make recommendations regarding the facility” and help “draft, implement and evaluate a strategic plan” for the facility.

The group will be comprised of between seven and 11 members. County officials are invited to participate, but would not be voting members of the committee.

County Manager Stephen Archuleta has indicated he will be receptive to the committee’s input.

“I’m one perspective and I don’t have all the answers. My hope is that by working with this advisory group, they can look at our booking sheets, they can look at our high risk issues,” he said. “I’m hoping this group will bring other resources to us.”

A draft of the proposed bylaws is expected to be presented to the Taos County Commission later this month.

If approved, the group would meet in the Taos County Administrative Complex at 1 p.m. on the fourth Thursday of each month.

