

news

ACLU of Southern California
1313 W. 8th St. Los Angeles, CA 90017
213.977.5252 aclusocal.org



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
July 1, 2014

Contact: Sandra Hernandez or Diana Rubio 213.977.5252

Report Offers Roadmap for Developing Diversion Programs for People with Mental Illness in Los Angeles County Jails

(Los Angeles, CA)—The ACLU of Southern California (ACLU SoCal) and the Judge David L. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law today unveiled **“A Way Forward,”** a new report that sets forth recommendations that would allow Los Angeles County officials to establish and implement diversion programs for inmates with mental illness charged with non-violent offenses. Such programs save money, improve public safety by dramatically reducing recidivism, and reduce jail overcrowding.

Los Angeles County’s jail system is the nation’s largest psychiatric institution. On any given day, an estimated 3,200 inmates diagnosed with a severe mental illness crowd the jails. The number of suicides has increased over a two-year span, and inmates with mental illness are more likely to suffer abuse at the hands of other inmates or jail staff. The recidivism rates among inmates with mental illness are extraordinarily high.

Last month, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) found that Los Angeles County violates the constitutional rights of inmates by failing to provide adequate mental health care and appropriate suicide prevention policies. DOJ encouraged the county’s efforts to expand diversion programs for those inmates with mental illness.

Diversion programs direct people with mental illness who have been arrested or are incarcerated for non-violent offenses to effective community-based programs that combine treatment with supportive housing, as well as medication management and employment assistance.

“Diversion programs have proven successful in Seattle, San Antonio, and Miami-Dade County,” said Peter Eliasberg, legal director of the ACLU SoCal. “Implementing these programs would be a substantial savings to the county, and it would also reduce recidivism and increase the quality of life for people who have mental illness.”

“Everyone loses when we criminalize a person with a mental illness,” said Ira Burnim, legal director at the Judge David L. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law. “As this Report explains, diversion programs that ensure access to Assertive Community Treatment, supportive housing, and other evidence-based community treatment options are win-win: they result in better treatment outcomes; they save money; and they are simply the right thing to do.”

In Los Angeles County, the annual cost of housing an inmate is about \$38,000. The annual cost of housing and treating an inmate with mental illness is about \$63,000. By contrast, the cost of placing an individual in a diversion program that includes supervision and permanent supportive housing with wrap-around services is about \$21,000 per year.

Implementing this plan would also reduce county costs by putting some of the financial responsibility on the federal government. Currently, the county cannot use Medi-Cal, 50 percent of which is funded by the federal government, to pay for treatment in the jail. But Medi-Cal funds can be used in community treatment programs.

Link to report and video: <http://www.aclusocal.org/awayfoward>

Link to endorsements: <http://www.aclusocal.org/awayfoward/orgs>

###