

Commission on the Status of Mental Health of Iowa's Corrections Population

Sponsored by the Community Corrections Improvement Association, Cedar Rapids, Iowa
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Executive Summary

Due to growing concerns about mental health issues, those involved in Iowa's correctional system, the Community Corrections Improvement Association (CCIA), formed the Commission on the Status of Mental Health of Iowa's Corrections Population. The Commission established the following goals: provide a public forum for the exchange of dialogue on mental health issues; provide information on national and state issues and trends; discuss how mental health issues will affect corrections treatment programs; receive grassroots community feedback; build a constituent base and sponsor a public policy conference.

To accomplish those goals, CCIA and the Commission held a series of eight public hearings in early November. The hearings were designed to consider the issue from local perspectives as well as share and exchange information with participants and Commission members about issues and concerns, and solutions that work. Attended by over 300 Iowans, the hearings were one phase in this broader effort by CCIA and the Commission to call attention to this issue.

During the hearings, participants completed a self-administered survey that the State Public Policy Group (SPPG) was commissioned to develop and analyze. The questionnaire was brief, taking less than 10 minutes to complete. At the same predetermined time in each hearing, the survey was distributed and monitored by proctors. In all 240 participants completed the questionnaire. While those who participated had varied backgrounds – corrections professionals, mental health professionals, policymakers, and citizens – they can be characterized as being part of the universe of people engaged in mental health corrections policy. Granted this is a subjective evaluation, as any opinion poll is, but in respondents' eyes the system is doing better at some things than others.

Following is a brief summary highlighting information gleaned from the hearings and through analysis of the survey data.

- The hearing participants recognized this is not just a corrections issue, but agreed this issue is one that impacts all Iowans, from those individuals with mental health issues incarcerated or involved with corrections, to victims of crime, to taxpayers.
- Survey respondents were asked about nine mandates dealing with mental health services for individuals in Iowa's correctional system. For the mandate the state performed best at- accurate, complete, and confidential records – one out of five respondents still believed the state was not meeting its legal obligations.
- Survey analysis shows there are statistically significant differences among the judicial districts in fulfilling three of these mandates – maintaining accurate, complete, and confidential records; prisoners having a means of making their medical needs known to the staff; and offering a suicide prevention program.
 - Judicial District 1 respondents think the system in their area does a good job meeting its mandate about records at statistically significantly larger rates than Districts 4, 5, and 6.

- Judicial District 5 respondents reported their district is doing less than an adequate job in terms of prisoners having the means to make their medical needs known. The level of dissatisfaction was reported at a rate of over 60%, which is statistically significantly more than the dissatisfaction reported in Districts 2 and 8.
 - Nearly 25% of respondents in Judicial District 2 believed their suicide prevention program was excellent. This figure was statistically significantly greater than the responses from Districts 3, 4, and 5.
- Because of the breadth of impacts of this issue, there is no single solution that will fix the problem. In fact, the currently garmented treatment system is extremely ineffective in many ways, from the loss of benefits such as Medicaid or Social Security upon incarceration, to the failure to develop effective treatment plans that can be carried out upon release to the community.
 - Participants clearly believe this is an issue that carries a high degree of urgency. This is borne out through comments made at the public hearings and the survey responses. When asked about the urgency of solving certain state government problems, such as recurring drug crimes with better community prevention and treatment programs, such as reducing drug crimes with better community prevention and treatment programs, ensuring access to mental health and substance abuse treatment services, and reducing repeat offenses by treating prisoners' mental illness and substance abuse problems, respondents reported solving each of the three problems is an urgent matter at rates of 69.2%, 80.8% and 78.3%, respectively.
 - While there were individuals exceptions, overall there is a lack of communication between mental health funders and providers and corrections staff across the state. Iowa's mental health system is hugely complex and difficult to navigate. Corrections staff in large part acknowledge a lack of understanding of the mental health system. When that lack of understanding is combined with a lack of an effective relationship with the county central point of coordination, the end result is typically a lot of floundering around trying to access services on behalf of the offender, at best. The worst-case scenario is that inadequate or no services are arranged and the offender relapses and again winds up in trouble.
 - When asked where to place three people from case studies who were dealing with mental health, substance abuse, and corrections issues, the placement setting chosen by more respondents for every case was a setting that provided mental health services, something all three subjects needed.
 - There are many issues relation to funding. But central to the funding issue is the fact that many services have narrow eligibility definitions; are funded through different streams, each with their own set of regulations; and are limited at times by legal settlement issues.
 - The vast majority of respondents, 88%, believe increasing mental health and substance abuse services to prisoners while in prison and before release will have a positive impact on public safety. Next to no one sees this approach as having a negative impact on public safety; only 1% responded in this manner.
 - Over three-quarters of respondents in Judicial District 1 said they believe there would be a substantial increase in public safety from increased availability of mental health and substance abuse services in prison. The overwhelming support for this position was so

different that it was statistically significantly different than Judicial Districts 3, 4, 6, and 8; half of the remaining districts.

- The concept of a “no closed doors” program (a program in which any agency throughout the community – churches, fire stations, police, clinics, Department of Human Services offices, ect. - should have a uniform protocol whereby persons with mental illness are immediately referred to a mental health provider) was supported by respondents across the state. Statewide, 50% thought it would be very valuable in preventing those individuals who were referred from ending up in the corrections system and another 31% thought it would be fairly valuable.
- Throughout the eight hearings, participants called for the better use of available resources. If funding were to follow the individual, services could be continuous and catered to address the needs of the individual. Participants also want more focus on prevention, with earlier and more effective screenings for substance abuse and mental health issues in recognition that prevention efforts have a large payoff in the long term by avoiding higher cost placements or incarcerations.

Additional information regarding the public hearings and the survey analysis are available from CCIA upon request. The Commission and CCIA plan to use findings gleaned from these two efforts to plan and hold a public policy conference in Spring 2002 that will focus on solutions to these complex problems. The end result of this process will be an effort, from broad-based constituency, to influence public policy and bring about positive change in these critical areas.