

Forensic Interagency Task Force

Meeting Notes

10/4/16

This is the eighth meeting of this resumption of the Forensic Interagency Task Force (FITF) convened by FTAC/FSS.

Jim Fouts of FSS, welcomed the group and asked attendees for self-introductions and to relate new things that are happening in the Commonwealth from their varied perspectives.

Today's first presenter was John Wetzel, Secretary of Corrections.

Secretary Wetzel began with some statistics – The PA DOC currently has 50,000 incarcerated individuals. Approximately 28% of those are on the Mental Health “C” roster and 7-8% on the Seriously Mentally Ill “D” roster.

Since the DOJ investigation there has been a 3 prong change process occurring. Sec. Wetzel spoke about 2 of those initiatives. The first was training of all DOC personnel in Mental Health First Aid. He reported that upwards of 15,000 staff have been trained to this date. The number one goal of this training was to decrease the stigma associated with mental illness. The second initiative was Crisis Intervention Training. Approximately 1100 staff have been trained at the rate of about 30 per month. Next years' budget will be adding a full time training team and will be increasing the rate of training to about 90 staff a month with 6-8 trainings to be set for regionally based county jails. There will also be a basic research component to the team that will be looking at outcomes surrounding not only reduction of stigma but reductions in injuries amongst inmates and CO's and use of force incidents. He discussed the incentive for training including the difference in cost of one bad incident (potentially 7 figures) versus the cost of appropriate training.

Next he discussed the Stepping Up Initiative, a national initiative to reduce the number of folks with mental illness that are incarcerated. It is being done in cooperation with the National Association of Counties (NACo), the Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center, and the American Psychiatric Foundation (APF). In PA it is being piloted in 3 counties with at least 10 counties signing on to the initiative. It's first goal is to collect data. Dauphin County will be instituting a data gathering and analysis program. It was chosen because of being diversion friendly, having a diverse population, having a DA that is OK with taking risks. He stated that we all have “issues” within our counties and that until we quantify those issues we cannot define them as problems and once we define the problem we can know what to fix.

The DOJ investigation put a microscope on a system that was not intended to care for the mentally ill and it showed all of the problems.

He answered questions regarding several issues.

He talked about additional initiatives within PA including transformation of the current bail system and legal defense for indigent persons to deal with “front end” issues.

He stated that as of today everyone being released will have applied for all benefits that they are entitled to. PA is also looking into creating additional centers for Excellence in the Corrections System like they are creating for the current opioid epidemic.

In that vein the DOC is currently running a pilot utilizing Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) in their treatment of drug and alcohol addiction. The data collection in this projection is almost complete and additional pilots will be started in local county jails soon.

He discussed the issue of “juvenile lifers”. PA has more than any other state (approx. 504). Almost half of them don’t even have social security numbers.

He answered a question on locally available lethality assessments for victims of domestic violence and referred interested parties to the Victim Advocates Office or Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

Secretary Wetzel was thanked by Dave Dinnich for his work in stepping outside the department to work on issues that better the citizens of the Commonwealth.

The next presentation was a pre final report on the activities of the Reentry Committee by Tory Bright. She expressed the importance of the issue by stating some statistics related to the number of returning citizens the Southeast Regional Mental Health Services has had to deal with. In 2015 the roster listed 420 returning citizens. In 2016 it lists 780.

She gave a brief history of the Reentry Committee and its’ work on 3 issues – Housing, Benefits and Documentation and Referral to Services. The final summary will be presented at the next Forensic Rights and Treatment Conference at the end of November and at the next FITF Meeting.

Discussion was had on the need for County Assistance Offices to have a specific person designated for Forensics. Jim Fouts will be clarifying that need with someone from OIM.

Ben Laudermilch, Executive Housing Director, PA DHS gave an update to his report of several months ago. There is a new IT enhancement initiative being unveiled soon to allow people to complete their application and sort out of all available programs as to what they are eligible for instead of having to complete separate applications. He also discussed the 811 Program which has been around for a while but was very difficult to access. It has been revised to make it easier to access. There is a Webinar coming that will inform interested parties on the Housing Services supports programs.

Next meeting will be : Tuesday November 22, 2016.

Report submitted by Jim Fouts