

Region backs efforts to address mental illness in jails



Kym Klass, Montgomery Advertiser 4:30 p.m. CST January 5, 2016

County commissioners in Montgomery, Autauga, Elmore and Lowndes counties have signed a resolution in support of a new national initiative called Stepping Up, which works to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in the nation's jails.

In 2013, the River Region began addressing challenges to mental healthcare access, which eventually resulted in the creation of the Healthy Minds Network, a Collective Impact Initiative of Envision 2020 and Auburn Montgomery Outreach. Since then, the HMN established the Post-incarceration Case Management Program that is under the Montgomery Area Mental Health Authority.

Reducing the number of people with mental illness in the River Region's jails is "not just a public safety issue," said Lynn Beshear, executive director of Envision 2020. "It is also a taxpayer issue because it will move taxpayer dollars where they will have the greatest impact.

"And most importantly, it is a human issue. Mental illness is the only illness treated as though it were a crime. People who receive the treatment and the supports they need are successful in the community. Law enforcement and jail personnel at all levels are essential players in this initiative. It is community safekeeping in action for all citizens."

Because mental illness is a regional problem, and because the area's largest public provider of mental health services is a regional facility, "it depends on funding from each of the counties and support of each of the counties," said Linnea Conely, a consultant with AUM Outreach.

"Without the support of each of the counties, this initiative wouldn't really go anywhere," she said. "It is the counties that back the mental health authority."

Bashear said it is a public affirmation that the counties and the River Region understand that mental illness is a significant problem.

"We believed that it was significant that all four counties stepped up to support the Stepping Up initiative," she said, "which further affirms our work and gives us more permission at a higher level to actually be very proactive in what we're trying to do."

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