

More than 400 counties sign Stepping Up pledge

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NACo's Stepping Up campaign has more than 400 counties committed to reducing the number of people with mental illness in county jails



Bill Hall spent most of his tenure on the Lincoln County, Oregon Board of Commissioners focusing on human services issues. He saw the jail above capacity almost daily, with nearly 30 percent of inmates showing signs of mental illness.

The county had a drug court. It had a mental health court. It had post-release transitional housing. But it took a Stepping Up Summit in April 2016, coordinated by NACo, the American Psychiatric Association and the Council of State Governments Justice Center to give him a new perspective on the problem.

"It was a revelation for me. I knew a lot of these concepts were out there, but it was the thread that tied it all together," he said. "I started talking it up with all the usual stakeholders around the county and by October, we'd signed a resolution."

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Stepping Up <<https://stepuptogether.org/>>

Lincoln County had joined the growing list of Stepping Up counties — now topping more than 400 — that pledge to take steps to change the way they do business to try to get help to people with mental illness, instead of putting them in jail. In the year since the county signed on to Stepping Up, Hall and County Sheriff Curtis Landers have set out in a new direction.

"We knew what we were doing wasn't working," Landers said. "A deputy could take someone to the hospital after an incident, but they'd be waiting up to nine hours and the deputy would have to be there with them. Sooner or later, they realized it was a lot faster to find a little charge they could book them on, take them to jail and get back out there."

In exchange for that expedience, the inmate who needed help wasn't getting it. "If they really needed help, they'd deteriorate more," Landers said. "Jail's no place for someone with mental illness."

Changing that has meant a comprehensive examination of what the county does. The county's Stepping Up consultant called together representatives from every branch of the county government or social service organization who interacts with an inmate to see how they could all improve their processes and results.

It's an exercise known as Sequential Intercept Mapping, and it's a Stepping Up cornerstone. What was once as messy and tangled as a plate of pasta was now a flow chart, guiding people through the system, including before, during and after incarceration.

In October, a year after the Board signed the resolution, the county was focused on hospital, crisis, respite care, peer and community services, and law enforcement and emergency services. The sheriff's office spans two intercept points. Right now, Landers is trying to schedule crisis intervention training for all 100 of his personnel, which is a challenge, given the 40-hour time frame for that training.

"It's a crucial step, because after that training, the deputies will have the tools to address people's needs and be able to de-escalate a situation that could be more dangerous if mental illness is involved," he said.

Though the shift has involved a cultural change for his department, Landers said his deputies were buying in and saw the value.

"It's not a soft-on-crime approach, it's a smart-on-crime approach," he said. "It's going to pay off for everyone because if we can correct these things, deputies can spend their time doing better things. Things they want to do."

Hall and Landers both said that communicating the process and the benefits to everyone involved helps promote buy-in.

"It's a leadership thing," Landers said. "If you have the passion and vision, discuss it."

The next step for Lincoln County will be developing pre-trial diversion programs and hiring a full-time Stepping Up coordinator, then planning annual updates for crisis intervention training to accompany CPR trainings.

"We really want to have pre-trial diversion services, that's the point where I'll feel like we've made a big step," Hall said. "There's enough momentum now that we should be able to do it."

The staff position would focus on planning, community building and fundraising for Stepping Up-related operations.

The county's community building is already paying off, with a local motel interested in offering a few rooms for transitional housing for participants who have been stabilized, are sober, have no outstanding restraining orders, have no convictions of domestic violence and are able to care for themselves. It will not be used for midnight drop-offs. The county has also added transitional probation officers to help inmates prepare for and navigate post-release life.

"We're increasing what we have to offer all along the spectrum," Hall said. "More people are getting on board all the time. We definitely have momentum here."

Lincoln County TAPS new staff resources

Lincoln County, Oregon expanded its post-release transition programming by starting earlier and staying with an inmate longer than before, thanks to the addition of several staff members to support the larger scope. That focus on the steps outside of jail, through the Transition and Programming Services (TAPS) program, has helped the county target recidivism in its post-release population and offer attention to help ex-offenders adjust to life after jail.

After watching one probation officer try to keep pace with the rate of jail discharges and post-release follow-up, the county added a full-time transition probation officer and two part-time probation officer technicians. That allows the new full-timer to start working with inmates well before their release to create individual plans and arrange for wraparound social services. The single probation officer did not have time to do this in-depth planning with individual inmates beforehand.

The transition officer keeps tabs on each offender for at least six months to a year, handing them off to the traditional probation officer after offenders reach program benchmarks. Once transitional living arrangements are made, the part-time probation officer technicians take over.

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