

Summit jail says it will no longer accept violent mentally ill

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The Summit County Jail will no longer automatically accept violent, mentally ill people arrested for a crime.

Noting that 40 percent of the people in the jail are now on psychotropic drugs for mental illness, Summit County Sheriff Drew Alexander said Monday that jail is not the place for prisoners who "outwardly show signs of mental illness, along with aggression and hostility."

Alexander said he knows the decision will cause problems for police, but believes it's time to take a stand.

"We may be the first sheriff's department to do this," he said. "We've been thinking about this for five years and the time has come to do it."

He said the policy goes into effect immediately.

"These people do not belong in jail," he said. "They need to be in a place where they can get treatment. Jails have become a dumping ground and something must be done. I can't fix it, but I can dump the problem into the laps of people who can."

Previously, if an aggressive, mentally ill person was arrested by the police he would be put in jail, Alexander said. Often, the person would have to be put into restraints for his own protection and the safety of the deputies.

The problem was brought into focus in 2006 when a 325-pound inmate named Mark McCullough Jr. died of a heart attack in his cell after being subdued by five sheriff's deputies.

The five deputies were indicted, but all charges were dismissed after one deputy was found not guilty of murder after an eight-day trial.

"He was a huge man, homeless and in and out of jail and mental health facilities," Alexander said.

"He hit some cops and was booked. A week later, he was found naked in his cell writing on the wall with his own feces and ripping open a slash on his wrist where he had previously tried to kill himself. It took five men to restrain him."

Alexander said since that incident, the jail is under constant video surveillance.

After today, police officers will bring a person to the jail and he will be evaluated by the jail's mental health staff to determine if he should be admitted.

"If a person had an injury he would be sent to a hospital; this is the same thing," he said. "If he's mentally ill and violent, they have to take him somewhere else to be stabilized."

Alexander said the "somewhere else" will be the Portage Path Behavioral Health Center in Akron, which has a contract with the county to evaluate and house such patients. Or the person could be taken to one of the three Akron hospitals with mental health wards.

The Akron hospitals and Portage Path were contacted to discuss the new policy, but their representatives did not return calls.

Jerry Craig, executive director of the Summit County Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services Board — who staffs the jail with mental health professionals — believes there is an adequate system in place.

"We need to talk to the sheriff to see what criteria he is using to determine if a person should not be taken into the jail," he said. "But we will send them to Portage Path or the hospitals if necessary."

Debbie Nixon-Hughes, deputy director of program and policy development for the Ohio Department of Mental Health, agreed

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that communication with the sheriff about where to draw the line on admitting mentally ill people is crucial.

"Summit County is already doing some innovative strategies — its mental health courts for example — that put the county ahead of the curve," she said.

Alexander's policy is getting grudging support from mental health professionals around the state. All agree that something needs to be done.

Terry Russell, director of the National Alliance For the Mentally Ill in Columbus, said that the jails have become a dumping ground for the mentally ill since the state closed 11 of its 17 psychiatric hospitals in 1988.

"The criminal justice system has become the quasi-mental health system and it's not meant to be," said Russell. "It also makes no financial sense to put these people into a regular hospital when it would be far less expensive to put them in a mental health facility where they could be treated."

Russell said he understands that the state has a budget deficit, but it would save money by treating the mentally ill people properly instead of forcing them into jails.

John O'Brien, spokesman for the Cuyahoga County Sheriff's Office, declined to address the issue without further study.

Lt. Rick Edwards, spokesman for the Akron Police Department, said police officers are trained to recognize when a person needs to go to the hospital as opposed to the jail.

"Our officers are trained in crisis intervention," he said. "They should be able to determine this."

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