

ALLEGHENY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

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Senate Bill 226 – Assisted Outpatient Treatment

Testimony

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Allegheny County Department of Human Services

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I would like to thank the members of the Senate Public Health and Welfare Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding Senate Bill 226.

My name is Amy Kroll. I have been working in the corrections and behavioral health fields since 1982. I was a correctional officer at the State Correctional Institution at Camp Hill, PA, for 6 years; taught correctional officers at the PA State Department of Corrections Training Academy, and performed duties as a Masters Level Clinician at Psychiatric Emergency Services, Advocates Inc. in Framingham, Massachusetts. I have also worked as a residential program director for Mercy Behavioral Health Supportive Housing in Pittsburgh.

Since 1994, I have been the Director of Forensic Services in the Office of Behavioral Health, Allegheny County Department of Human Services. In this capacity, I oversee all justice-related services supported by Allegheny County.

Specifically, those services are: Pre- and post-booking Jail Diversion; Justice-Related Support Services; Allegheny County Drug Court; Allegheny County Mental Health Court; the CROMISA program (Community Reintegration of Offenders with Mental Illness and Substance Abuse), and the Innovations in Government Award winning program – Justice-Related State Support Program.

A brief summary of these activities:

Post-booking jail diversion services: supports all Allegheny County forensic walk-ins and requests for 302 warrants at the County Office of Behavioral Health; provides coverage at the Allegheny County lock-up/jail intake area; coordinates all mental health treatment commitments for the forensic population; coordinates services through the Service Coordination Units and other agencies for individuals released from the Allegheny County Jail prior to or at the preliminary hearing; develops and presents an appropriate service plan to the District Courts.

Justice-Related Support Services: provides case management for all persons with mental illness referred from the point of formal arraignment to the sentencing. Support services are continued for up to 60 days after release from the Allegheny County Jail or for 60 days after sentencing.

The Justice-Related State Support Program: provides case management for persons with mental illness referred from the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections at the expiration of a maximum prison sentence. The State Support Specialist assists the individual for up to 90 days after release.

CROMISA: is a 21-bed facility therapeutic community located in downtown Pittsburgh that supports men with co-occurring mental illness and substance use disorder who are on County or State probation or parole.

Mental Health Court: is designed to promote treatment in the community in lieu of incarceration for the defendant with mental illness.

Drug Court: is designed for persons who are actively using illegal substances and involved with the criminal justice system. Candidates must meet eligibility criteria and be willing to plead guilty to the charges for which they were arrested. If accepted and approved for the court, individuals are placed on Restrictive Intermediate Punishment (house arrest) followed by probation and enrolled in intensive drug treatment, as an alternative to incarceration.

Our newest programs, both funded in October 2006, are the CIT program and the Pre-booking Jail Diversion program. The Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) activity has been funded by the U.S. Department of Justice and is a partnership with the City of Pittsburgh Bureau of Police to train and certify Crisis Intervention Team Officers.

The Pre-booking Jail Diversion program is funded by PCCD and is allowing us to divert eligible persons (with mental illness) from the jail intake into more appropriate community services.

As you can see from the number of programs above, Allegheny County Department of Human Services, Office of Behavioral Health has made, and continues to make a significant investment in ensuring that individuals with mental illness are not inappropriately involved in the criminal justice system, and that those who are involved with the criminal justice system, return to the community with treatment, case management and other services and supports, as early as possible.

Based upon our experience, and our very successful outcomes, we would like to offer a number of suggestions.

The Allegheny County Justice-Related services program has found that success is most probable when an individual with serious and persistent mental illness has real choice about the services that will best meet his or her needs. It is our experience that individuals who participate meaningfully in the development of their service plan, and who have an opportunity to understand how various services may be of benefit, and what the alternatives are, are more committed to implementation of their plan, and therefore, more successful.

Our concern is that Senate Bill 226 as currently written does not foster engagement or meaningful involvement of the person in a decision-making role. We would suggest that engagement and involvement are a necessary component of successful treatment and recovery. The Allegheny County Justice-Related services program has also found that most of the individuals with whom we work are impoverished as a result of their disability. The provision in

the bill that an individual may have counsel at his or her own expense, means that most individuals will not have benefit of counsel.

The Allegheny County Justice-Related services program has also found that most of the individuals with whom we work have a significant history of being perceived, and sometimes perceiving themselves, as a “second-class citizen”. People are most likely to succeed when their dignity is affirmed. Dignity can be affirmed by assuring that basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter are addressed, along with establishing a relationship that acknowledges the individual’s worth, shows interest in his or her hopes, dreams and fears, and is committed to assisting him or her to reach his or her goals – even when those goals might be very small ones. We believe that Senate Bill 226 would be much more effective if it included provision for acknowledging the dignity and strength of each individual, as well as his or her challenges and struggles.

Finally, we would like to suggest that attention be paid to simplifying and streamlining the substantial administrative and reporting requirements that are currently outlined in Senate Bill 226. We find that individuals served by Justice-Related services staff are most successful when staff are able to focus time and energy upon them. This requires limitation of reporting to that which is absolutely necessary.

We share with the Public Health and Welfare Committee the desire to assure that individuals have the best opportunity for success in the community. We are available to assist in that effort. I extend to the Committee an invitation to visit us in Allegheny County, and to allow us to assist you in serving the citizens of Pennsylvania.