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Madison County Commission tackles mental health crisis

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A new Madison County Commission initiative aims to improve care for mentally ill inmates while also saving tax dollars.

Commissioner Bob Harrison's jail diversion initiative would move nonviolent offenders out of jails and into treatment facilities.

Currently, it costs \$48 tax dollars a day to keep just one inmate at the Madison County Jail. Studies show the average nonviolent mentally ill offender stays in jail three to four times longer than the average violent offender, adding to the cost.

It's a drain on resources, but it's also a system in which inmates don't get the care they need. We heard that firsthand back in August from Jacqueline O'Neal, who was fighting for more resources at the Madison County Jail for her mentally ill son.

Since then, O'Neal has been busy working with the North Alabama Mental Health Coalition and talking to state and local officials like Commissioner Harrison. Her pleas no longer fall on deaf ears.

"Believe me, there are hundreds and maybe even thousands of little O'Neal boys in our community," Harrison said.

As part of his initiative, this week the Madison County Commission will hear from Leon Evans, a mental health official from the San Antonio area who has implemented diversion programs and seen success.





"In our jail we have a thousand empty beds, and the homeless count in downtown San Antonio is down 85 percent," Evans told us.

Evans also said the program saves money, and Harrison believes those dollars saved will help pay for the new programs.

They're things O'Neal has been fighting for for years. Now, she's just happy leaders from across the community are pulling up chairs at the table.

"To see everyone interacting and trying to put their heads together and seeing what they can do, I mean it really means a lot to me, my family and everyone in the community," she said.

One of the priorities in the jail diversion initiative is opening up more beds for inpatient mental health treatments, so these inmates have somewhere to go other than to jail.

If you're interested in learning more, a formal information session will be held on Tuesday from 10-12:30 pm at the Bob Harrison Wellness Center.

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