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**ODMHSAS RECEIVES \$150,000 FEDERAL GRANT TO FUND OKLAHOMA COUNTY MENTAL HEALTH COURT**

The Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services has received a two-year, \$150,000 grant to fund the Oklahoma County Mental Health Court. Allocated through the United States Department of Justice, the grant was one of only 23 awarded nationwide and the only one given for mental health courts in the southwest United States.

“Receiving this grant is a major step toward more humane treatment of certain individuals with a diagnosed mental illness who otherwise might end up in jail,” said Dr. Terry Cline, ODMHSAS commissioner. “Our state’s jails and prisons have, by default, become institutions for people with untreated mental illness.”

Operational in only a handful of locations nationwide, mental health courts are an alternative to incarceration for people with a diagnosed mental illness – schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or severe depression – charged with a misdemeanor or non-violent felony, said Cline. Participants must agree to plead guilty to their crime and have no history of violence. Eligibility is dependent upon approval of the district attorney’s office, with referrals received from attorneys, family members, law enforcement, and mental health or community agencies.

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Established on Nov. 1, 2002, the Oklahoma County Mental Health Court is Oklahoma's first and only mental health court. However, as no funding was allocated to begin the program, Oklahoma County District Court Judge Nancy Coats, who oversees the court, gave \$20,000 in campaign contributions as start-up money through the Oklahoma City Community Foundation.

Presently, the court has eight clients. By the end of the year, it is anticipated the caseload will approach 25 people.

"Mental health courts are the 'right thing at the right time,'" Coats said. "If we can save six people, or 10 people, a month by keeping them out of the already overburdened criminal justice system, we not only can save money, but we also can develop and identify the support needed to keep these individuals out of jail. Mostly, though, mental health courts are the right thing – the humane thing – to do."

Nearly 20 percent of the Oklahoma County Jail population – about 400 people on any given day – has a diagnosed mental illness, Cline added. Of these 400, about 167 receive treatment with anti-psychotic medication.

Jails, by their very nature, simply aren't designed to care for persons with mental illness, he said.

"Jails are not mental health hospitals," Cline said. "Due to lack of funding, they cannot provide the newer psychotropic medications that are more effective for our clients. Jails are not equipped to provide the same services as a mental health facility. As a result, many people with mental illness get lost in the system and are incarcerated much

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longer than they need to be. The jail is overwhelmed and the person with mental illness ‘falls through the cracks,’ so to speak, never receiving treatment for the root cause of their behavior.”

The Oklahoma County Mental Health Court uses a team approach, similar to drug courts, to determine who might benefit from the program. In addition to Coats and Kiedrian Fennell, ODMHSAS court liaison, other core team members include: Joe Taylor, ODMHSAS intensive case manager; Dr. Edith King, a forensic psychologist who has come out of retirement to volunteer her services; Kelly Basey, assistant district attorney; Genie Baumann, assistant public defender; Anna Wright, mental health coordinator for the Oklahoma County Detention Center; Susan Traywick, probation officer with the Oklahoma Department of Corrections; Capt. Robert Nash, Oklahoma City Police Department; and Susie Welch, Oklahoma Mental Health Consumer Council.

The program consists of four phases, and participants are in the program from six to 12 months, depending upon their treatment needs. The ultimate purpose of the program is the continued wellness of the participant and reduction in incidents of crime, Coats said.

Although mental health courts have been discussed for several years in Oklahoma, legislative go-ahead for the court didn’t occur until July of 2002, when House Bill 2015, “The Anna McBride Act,” authored by Rep. Al Lindley, D-Oklahoma City, was passed. The bill honors McBride, who recently died and was an active member of the Oklahoma City NAMI chapter for several years. McBride and NAMI’s state chapter were instrumental in advocacy for the legislation and in implementation of the local court.

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Legislation, however, came with no funding, so the court has been operating solely on donations. Federal funding will help pay for an intensive case manager, respite beds and provide “flexible” funding to help clients with housing and utility deposits, child care assistance and transportation.

In time, the mental health court could save Oklahoma taxpayers hundreds of thousand of dollars per year, Coats and Cline said, with savings averaging approximately \$15,000 per year per defendant.

Other benefits of the court include: maintenance of gainful employment, education and payment of taxes for qualified participants; reduction of recidivism; reunification opportunities for families; reduction of law enforcement calls for services for persons with mental illness; elimination of a portion of the caseload on criminal court dockets; and promotion of community safety through accountability and responsibility of participants.

“By using a holistic approach to enhance the quality of life of each participant, as well as the family and community, we can help persons with mental illness become productive members of society again,” Coats said. “The restoration of human dignity, and more dignified treatment for persons with mental illness in the justice system, is what we’re striving toward.”

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