

Mental health advocates push for implementation of Jail Diversion Program in Fall River

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FALL RIVER - Darlene Moreira saw law enforcement officers not being able to bring a suspect under control, as he was lying on the ground restrained by police boots pressing on the palms of his hands. As the officers' struggled to gain control, the person's belt broke and he ended up being dragged to the cruiser while losing his pants.

The suspect was not a hardened criminal running away from police, it was simply someone in need of mental help, she said.

"You have to avoid those situations, in which people suffering from mental health problems are picked up by the police, and often end up in jails for a long time not being able to get the right kind of treatment," said Moreira, who is a member of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Greater Fall River (NAMI).

For Moreira, incidents like the one she described can be drastically reduced, through the implementation of the Jail Diversion Program, which has been successful in Framingham. The program's goal is to prevent those with mental illnesses from entering the criminal justice system.

In Framingham, clinicians are based at Police Headquarters and accompany responding officers, do proactive outreach work to identify people in the community who need mental health services and are available to the police on a 24-hour basis to provide immediate crises counseling.

"We really need something like that in Fall River," added Moreira, whose daughter was once arrested by the police after allegedly being prescribed the wrong medication dosage, which caused her behavior to be altered.

Brenda Venice, president of NAMI of Greater Fall River, is contacting area politicians and the police department and hopes to see the Jail Diversion Program in Fall River.

"The program is really successful in Framingham and I believe that there is a need for it in our area," said Venice.

Venice's group, which meets once a month at the TowneHouse Club House in Fall River and at the Heritage Club House in New Bedford to discuss mental health issues, is planning a trip to Boston this Saturday to participate in the NAMI Walks' For The Mind of America.

"It is a great event along the Charles River. We participated last year, and it was wonderful to see so many people bringing recognition to this cause," said Venice.

Thomas Fisher, director of Community Care Services in Taunton, would also like to see a change in people's minds.

"The biggest problem as an industry is the perception that mental illness is not at the same level as physical illness," said Fisher. "I believe that a program like Framingham's is a great idea and will help the police."

For those interested in participating in the NAMI walks, transportation by bus will be available in Fall River and in New Bedford. To reserve a seat, call Venice at 508-678-2584.