

Festa: Jail diversion for repeat offenders

By Rep. Mike Festa/ View From The Hill

Thursday, October 27, 2005

Massachusetts police departments have found that they are repeatedly re-arresting the same individuals for minor disturbances and criminal offenses. These repeat offenders are often suffering from mental illness or substance abuse, problems that police departments are unprepared to handle appropriately. Too often are those who are in need of psychiatric help put into jail where the problem only becomes worse. We can learn a great deal from a highly successful pilot program in Framingham that addresses this issue.

In order to bridge the gap between the judicial system and mental health services, the Framingham Police Department collaborated with Advocates Psychiatric Emergency Services (PES) to create the Framingham Jail Diversion Program (JDP). This program strengthens the Commonwealth's criminal justice system and the community as it is a model of successful integration between law enforcement and mental health services. It helps to prevent those who suffer due to mental illness and substance abuse from becoming trapped in the judicial system, and ensures that the mentally ill who come into contact with the law are provided with proper services to meet their specific needs to lead them to a path of recovery.

To begin the program in April 2003, social workers from PES were based at the headquarters of the Framingham Police Department. Through training, the clinicians and police officers were able to adapt and feel comfortable working together in any crisis situation. The social workers assist the police during the intervention of disturbances involving emotionally or psychiatrically troubled individuals. Prior to the implementation of the program, police officers had little choice other than arresting or sending the mentally ill to the emergency room. Now,

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however, with the accompaniment of the clinicians to the scene of the disturbance, proper evaluation and treatment of the individuals has become possible. The outstanding capability of the police officers and the social workers in becoming a strong partnership is due to their immense flexibility and cooperation. [\[continue\]](#)

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The program's success is evident in the numbers. The JDP was involved in 469 interventions of which 212 were actual "jail diversion events." Of these 212 interventions, 80 were given the needed mental health or substance abuse treatment. Fifty-five, or 26 percent of the 212 incidents resulted in a trip to the emergency room. This is a significant decrease compared to the 89 percent of these types of interventions that resulted in a trip to the emergency room before JDP began.

Using this program, Framingham Police Department has successfully improved its efficiency in serving the community. While the privately funded program costs \$150,000 to implement and run effectively, the city is saving precious time and money by diverting the mentally ill from the emergency room or arrest. Without the adequate evaluations and referrals provided by the on-hand clinicians, valuable time and money would be lost due to unnecessary medical treatment and/or the process of arrest, trial, and adjudication.

The Framingham Jail Diversion Program is an example of the progressive changes law enforcement must make in order to confront new challenges in the commonwealth. We can no longer punish those who suffer with mental illness or substance abuse. Rather, we must reach out to them and make sure they receive the appropriate treatment in order to prevent them from a dead end path in the judicial system. This program exemplifies the unique combination of mental health services and law enforcement to work as a united front in improving our criminal justice system. The practices of the JDP should be adopted across the state to further ensure the safety of our communities and the competence of our justice system.

State Rep. Mike Festa, D-Melrose, represents the 32nd Middlesex District, which includes Wakefield precincts 3, 4, 5 and 6.

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