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✓ DIVERSION OF MENTALLY IMPAIRED FROM THE COUNTY  
AND STATE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

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Galveston County was faced with alleviating the problems law enforcement officers were having in implementing the Texas Mental Health Code. Bridging the gap between Social Services and law enforcement agencies resulted in the Mental Health Deputy Program, whose specialized service includes intervention in crisis situations and referral of clients to alternative assistance programs rather than inappropriate institutionalization or incarceration. Under the auspices of the County Commissioner's Court, the Galveston County Sheriff's Department, and the Regional Mental Health Mental Retardation Center, the Mental Health Deputy Program became a reality on September 1, 1975. The procedure established for handling mentally ill or disturbed clients in compliance with state law, protected the community as well as the rights of these individuals. This creative solution by county government has resulted in the lowest commitment rate to state institutions in Texas, if not the nation, while keeping almost all mentally disturbed and handicapped from being incarcerated.

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Program Objectives

The need for the program became apparent over the period of 1955 to 1975, when the task of dealing with a mentally handicapped and disruptive client in the community became more time consuming and less effective for a larger number of people. More humane care was needed and the needless incarceration of individuals became a concern of committing judges, specifically County Court at Law Judge Jerome Jones, and of County Psychiatrist William Henry, M.D.. The solution to this issue led to a clear description of goals and objectives and to set out clear methods in the adaptation of a procedure that would insure efficient services to the people. The first goal of the program was to maintain and increase high levels of communication between the county departments and community groups interested in handling mentally disabled persons, specifically between the Galveston County Sheriff's Department, the Gulf Coast Regional Mental Health Mental Retardation Center, The University of Texas Medical Branch Hospital, and Municipal Police Departments. The second objective was to establish a special operations unit to deal with the mentally and emotionally disturbed through crisis intervention, special screening, and information and referral to determine citizens' needs for psychiatric services and other types of assistance. This program relieved the untrained officer to better perform the duties in which he was originally instructed by the Sheriff's academy.

ACQUISITIONS

Program Results

Most of the requests for assistance come from the Galveston County Sheriff's Department and area police departments, but the mental health centers, human service agencies, private medical doctors, family and friends of disturbed individuals also seek services. In the past six years almost 22,000 calls and an active current follow-up caseload of over 7,000 indicate that the response factor to the goals of providing specialized assistance to this group of citizens in the county is positive.

The relationship between diverse groups has improved and in fact drawn closer. Inpatient unit psychiatrists from the local hospital, cooperative agreements between various community services, and the flow of clients has increased communication between county programs. Mental Health Deputies have offices with the Mental Health Mental Retardation Center and the Galveston County Sheriff's Department. In December, 1975, there were two Mental Health Deputies; in December, 1981, there were five deputies. The case load increase has been phenomenal. Each deputy works approximately 70 hours per week.

The question of who is being served is a difficult one since three months out of the year - or summer months - Galveston County population triples. Everyone in Galveston County is in the catchment area for service by all Mental Health Programs offered by Gulf Coast Regional Mental Health Mental Retardation Center, and the referral of people in any difficult situation, whether crisis or otherwise, is generally handled by them.

The first impression of this program was one of skepticism by the citizens and county agencies; and at first, there was a lot of overuse. Calls that the deputies would not necessarily had to have made; but as the division expanded and agencies became more alert, the program became a dependable and respected element within the legal system, policing system, and human service system. The commitment rate of mentally handicapped people from Galveston County to State institutions is the lowest of any urban county in the State of Texas, if not the lowest in the nation. Several articles have been published regarding this program and responses from other counties has been good. In 1980, the Gulf Coast Regional Mental Health Mental Retardation Center and the Mental Health Deputies won the National Gold Award from the American Psychiatric Association. In August, 1978, Legal Aspects of Medical Practice, printed an article on the Mental Health Deputy Program written by David L. Larson, M.D. and Lt. Dave Henry, Mental Health Deputy.

Program Operation

Three main elements are necessary for the establishment of the Mental Health Deputy Program; first, a sheriff's department and county court system responsive to the needs of the mentally disabled; second, a hospital willing and able to supply required care; and third, a community mental health center willing and able to supply backup, staff training, outpatient services and other assistance.

The first steps taken in the initiation of the program consisted of a proposal to the sheriff and to the executive director for the Gulf Coast Regional Mental Health Mental Retardation Center, to meet and to discuss needs, procedures, goals, and objectives. From

these discussions, a presentation of the program objectives was brought before the Galveston County Sheriff's Department, County Commissioner's Court, the Board of Trustees for the Gulf Coast Regional Mental Health Mental Retardation Center, Magistrates, Chiefs of Police, Area Agencies, The University of Texas Medical Branch, and community members, the Texas Department of Mental Health Mental Retardation, the Criminal Justice Division, the Galveston Association of Constables and Precinct Judges and the Moody Foundation. Each of these bodies participated in the implementation of the program.

Some of the county organizations who work with the Mental Health Deputy program are County Welfare, Department of Human Resources, the Probate Court, Juvenile Services, Youth Shelters, Crisis Center for Battered Women, Young Women's Christian Association, Bay Area Council on Alcoholism and the Drug Abuse Commission.

Mental Health Deputies are specialists in protecting their community and assuring that the rights of the mentally ill client are preserved. Officers in the Mental Health Deputy Program must first be certified as Texas Law Enforcement Officers. The individual must successfully complete 380 hours of the Galveston County Sheriff's Academy of which 320 hours are mandated by the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education. In addition to this strict certification, they are also cross-trained as Emergency Medical Technicians. The officers are then assigned to a patrol for at least six months to give them experience in the field, for Galveston County. The next step in training is a nine month service

in casework with the Gulf Coast Regional Mental Health Mental Retardation Center. Then, when an officer is called to the scene of a disturbance, they can screen and react with appropriate direction to best assist the client and the community. After screening, if there is determined that there is no urgent need for psychiatric services, the Mental Health Deputies can arrange for outpatient services, elective hospitalization, referral to other human service agencies, or no further services required. If psychiatric evaluation is indicated, the Mental Health Deputy may then appeal to a magistrate for necessary legal action in order that the individual might be transferred to a specific hospital for emergency psychiatric evaluation.

Crisis situations serviced, attend to the needs of not only the individual, but also of the family and of the legal system. Deputies investigate suicides and suicide attempts as well as domestic disturbances. The Mental Health Deputy program acts as a liaison with the Drug and Alcohol Abuse program which is contracted on a yearly basis through the Criminal Justice Division. The Deputies are public representatives and are involved in public speaking and volunteering their assistance to a variety of civic organizations. The Mental Health Deputy Program goes beyond the requirements of the law by servicing the needs of the people.

Funding for the Mental Health Deputy program comes from the Gulf Coast Regional Mental Health Mental Retardation Center, the County of Galveston, and the Galveston County Sheriff's Department. The Moody Foundation has made considerable donations to the program.

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