

Should the CVCA be asking local legislators why the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Regional Jail offers the most meager mental health services of any facility in the area?

According to information just obtained from the HRRJ, suicidally depressed inmates, without the availability of any counseling, were confined in restraint chairs a total of 22 times during the first six months of this year for fear they would harm themselves. The minimum amount of time spent in such restraint, with belts and cuffs immobilizing the inmate's legs, arms, and torso, was two hours, with 28 hours being the longest.

During this same period, the jail's *segregated padded cell* was used 14 times for "medical reasons" (for someone considered at risk for suicide). HRRJ's "rubber room", *the only one still in use by any area jail I know of*, has no bed or furnishings of any kind, no mattress, blanket, reading material or eating utensils. A grate in the floor serves as a commode, and the inmate is given a heavy suicide smock for warmth. He or she is cut off from all human contact except for regular suicide checks, and again no counseling is available at this or any other time.

Also during this six-month period 12 inmates were assigned to a *regular segregated cell* while on suicide watch. Here an inmate wears a "suicide smock" (paper gown), and is given a blanket and a few approved personal items. This is the procedure followed by most jails and state prisons for suicidal inmates.

Incarceration itself, especially in double-bunked, crowded cells with some inmates sleeping on the floor, is psychologically stressful for anyone, and it is hard to imagine the trauma the above forms of confinement might create for depressed, paranoid and/or suicidal inmates. Hence the efforts of some of us to continue to work with Sheriff Bryan Hutcheson at our local jail, along with Mr. Lacy Whitmore of the Community Services Board, to seek ways of improving mental health services for local inmates.

This effort includes appealing to members of the Harrisonburg City Council and the County Board of Supervisors for more adequate funds for mental health services as well as offering the services of local mental health professional volunteers and supervised interns to help as needed. These carefully vetted individuals could be on call to work with the CSB and jail personnel to provide a therapeutic presence for troubled inmates in a time of crisis.

I fully understand the present plight of the sheriff and his overworked and underpaid staff having to provide for the needs of some 400 inmates. They have to deal with their inmates the best way they can with the limited budget and resources they have.

But why should our relatively well-to-do community, blessed with a near surplus of available mental health professionals, be limited to a budget of under \$18,000 a year to provide psychological treatment and care for its local inmates? This expenditure, through a contract HRRJ has with our local Community Services Board, is by far the most meager per inmate of any facility in the region, and covers only about an hour of mental health screening and three hours of medication management per week, the latter provided by a trained nurse practitioner.

By comparison, the new Rappahannock-Warren-Shenandoah Regional Jail, with a capacity of 375 when it becomes filled, employs a full time mental health worker, and the Winchester Regional Jail, with 600 inmates, has two full time counselors.

The Arlington County Jail, currently housing just over 500, employs five full time professional counselors and a full time psychologist, partly funded with grant money. By last report, Arlington County, with this enviable program, is actually seeing its jail population decline.

Rockingham County boasts of having the lowest tax rate in Virginia except for tourist rich Williamsburg, but we are far, far from being the poorest County in the Commonwealth.

Not only can we afford to offer far better mental health services than we have, but given the wealth of human and other resources in our community, we could develop a comprehensive criminal justice system that could become a model for Virginia, one that invests more in education, prevention, treatment, diversion and restorative justice programs and less in building ever more expensive jail facilities.

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