

NINA MOINI: You may have heard of a drug court, a route through the criminal justice system focused on treatment for substance use disorder. A county just south of the Twin Cities has opened a similar pathway meant to help people with serious mental health illnesses get out of cycles of incarceration.

Rice County's mental health court joins five other courts like it around the state. Community corrections manager Angela Brewer is a leader of this effort. And she joins me now to tell us more about it. Thanks for being with us, Angela.

ANGELA BREWER: Hello. Thank you so much. I'm so happy to be here.

NINA MOINI: Happy to have you. Tell us a little, if you would-- what led to you wanting to establish a mental health court in Rice County? It seems like it's still pretty uncommon.

ANGELA BREWER: Absolutely. Here in Rice County, we do have a companion drug court program. So we're familiar with the problem-solving court model and the impact that it can have on people's lives and the importance to have that in our community.

And as we started to really see a pretty serious increase in the amount of people coming through our local criminal justice system who were experiencing severe and persistent mental health disorders that were impairing their ability to navigate community supervision or the community justice system, a few years ago, we started to really take a look at those trends. We were seeing an increase in competency evaluation requests for folks coming through our courts. And we're just looking as a collaborative group of stakeholders at how we might improve service in our community and how we may help people successfully navigate their time in the justice system.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, because these trends have been ongoing. The National Alliance on Mental Illness, or NAMI, says individuals with mental illness are overrepresented in jails and prisons, which the group says can't sometimes provide the services that are needed fully. What have you seen in your work with the intersection of mental illness and criminal justice?

ANGELA BREWER: I think at its core, the challenge that we see most often is just the instability that someone who is experiencing a mental health crisis is having. It's very difficult for individuals to focus on mandates from the court or requirements of supervision that they are supposed to be following when they're trying to navigate basic needs, especially housing or stability in their mental health and services related to medication or ongoing therapy or hospitalization needs.

NINA MOINI: Lots of factors there. Would you tell us a little bit about who exactly is eligible for mental health court?

ANGELA BREWER: Absolutely. We do have a criteria designated for our court. To be eligible for mental health court in Rice County, a person must meet all of the following criteria. They need to be 18 years of age or older. So they need to be an adult, be a Rice County resident with a felony-level offense.

They would score high risk on a Level of Service Case Management Inventory, which is a risk assessment tool used in community supervision through corrections, and high risk, high need on the Risk and Needs Triage, commonly known as the RANT, assessment, which really looks at a person's overall risk and need areas along their mental health, substance health, things of that nature. And they have to have a diagnosis of a severe and persistent mental illness.

Other factors that are required for admission-- the person must be legally competent. So if they're going through the court system and there's been a finding of incompetency, they would not be sentenced into the mental health court program.

And one of the most important factors in determining which cases may come to us is that the person's pattern of behavior that's bringing them to the criminal justice system needs to have a significant relationship between their mental illness and their criminal behavior. So that's what's underlying or driving some of those behaviors.

NINA MOINI: That's good context. Thank you. Can you zoom in just a little bit on what the process is like? Where within the process would one decide, this person should be referred to a mental health court?

ANGELA BREWER: Absolutely. Referrals to mental health court could come to us through the court, through the prosecutor's office, through the public defender or private attorney referral, or through the probation department. We handle community supervision. And so individuals who are already on supervision, who may be appropriate for the program, can be referred, as well, if there is a violation bringing the person back before the court.

In terms of where in the process this would occur depends on where the referral is coming from. Oftentimes, that may be a consideration at the time of sentencing in a case. And I think it's important to mention, too, the participant has to be willing to participate in the mental health court program. It is a voluntary program in the sense that if a person does not voluntarily agree to participate in the program, they would not be sentenced in by the court.

So I know it can sound confusing to say the court is sentencing someone into the program. But there is an element of it that the person has to voluntarily agree to be in the program because it does have different rules and parameters and different incentives and sanctions than someone may receive on traditional supervision.

NINA MOINI: Could someone still serve prison time, though, if-- even if they're diverted to the mental health court?

ANGELA BREWER: They could if, for example, they are sentenced into the mental health court and then they are unsuccessfully discharged from the program for behaviors that are inconsistent with the rules of the court. There is a process for what we would deem an administrative discharge. So if someone's mental illness rendered them incapable of complying with the program rules, that would not necessarily then translate to someone being terminated and referred for incarceration as a sanction.

NINA MOINI: So you got the funding, I understand, for the program just on July 1. So things are just getting underway. How is that going? How is the rollout going so far?

ANGELA BREWER: So far, I think things are really moving along in a very positive way. We here in Rice County are very excited to have this program launching. We have a really wonderful collaborative team of individuals who serve on the mental health court team. And the program is ready to go. We've received two referrals so far that the team is reviewing for eligibility.

We have time set aside with our treatment court, our mental health treatment court judge, Judge Long, who has time on her docket each Tuesday for mental health court sessions. So as soon as we have someone who is accepted and ready to enter the program, we are here and ready to launch that.

NINA MOINI: How do you measure success for a program like this? After a while, maybe after a year, what are you looking for? Are you just hoping that people will not be back in the system, or how will you measure how successful this is, because it could lead to more counties adopting this type of court?

ANGELA BREWER: Absolutely. I think there's a variety of ways that we would consider the program to be successful. If we have individuals who are coming into the program, obviously, public safety and a-- reduced recidivism rates are ultimate goals for us. So if individuals that are in the program are receiving services and they have life stability and their mental health is stabilized, we would expect to see them not engaging in criminal behavior, not being arrested and held in our local jail.

We also expect to see that the utilization of emergency room services and mental health or psychiatric placements or hospitalizations would reduce for individuals who are in the program because they are, essentially, receiving full wraparound services and support while they're inside the mental health court. So we're hoping to see a reduction in utilization of those services and a reduction in crisis calls for our local law enforcement, who in the past, with some of the participants, may have had frequent contact with them while they were in mental health crisis. It would be a safe assumption for us that if people are stabilized in their mental health and just in their general basic life needs that those crisis calls would reduce as well.

NINA MOINI: Angela, thank you for coming by and telling us all about this. We really appreciate it.

ANGELA BREWER: Thank you so much. It's been wonderful to be here. Thank you for having me.

NINA MOINI: Thank you. Angela Brewer is the community corrections manager for Rice County.