To address the opioid epidemic, Wisconsin launches pre-booking diversion pilot program in select areas

Three Wisconsin law enforcement agencies are beginning a statewide experiment in getting people who commit nonviolent crimes because they’re addicted to drugs into treatment rather than prison.

The “Pre-Booking Diversion Pilot Program,” a key recommendation in a 2016 report of the Governor’s Task Force on Opioid Abuse, will split $267,000 in state funding annually over two years between a sheriff’s office and two city police departments.

The intent is to “catch these people in early stages when they’re a low risk to the community, but with a high need for treatment,” and get them into treatment before they enter the criminal justice system, says Renee Lushaj, a justice system improvement specialist with the Wisconsin Department of Justice.

This kind of intervention should lower criminal justice- and health-related costs due to fewer people being imprisoned, fewer emergency calls, and fewer overdose cases, she says. Between 25 and 50 people are expected to be diverted annually before the pilot program expires at the end of 2019, Lushaj adds.

Only 600 of 18,000 police departments nationwide have diversion programs, says Jac Charlier, executive director of the Chicago-based Center for Health & Justice at Treatment Alternatives for Safe Communities.

“We’re very early in. The field is no more than six years old,” says Charlier, whose center works to promote diversion programs. Five diversion “pathways” have been identified, he says:

• Self-referral: Someone turns himself/herself in to police, without fear of arrest.
• Active outreach: Law enforcement identifies individuals and helps get them into treatment.
• Naloxone plus: Treatment is part of the response to an overdose or to a severe substance abuse disorder.
• Officer prevention: Law enforcement initiates the treatment option and no charges are filed.
• Officer intervention: Law enforcement initiates the treatment option, and charges or citations are held in abeyance, with a requirement for completion of treatment.

Illinois’ SB 3023, enacted in August, “is the only comprehensive legislation” in the country that authorizes deflection programs and is the first law in the country to allow communities to choose from any of the five pathways, Charlier says.

Ohio, where the Naloxone-plus pathway was developed, provided $3 million in its two-year budget for local Drug Abuse Response Teams. These teams of law enforcement officers, drug treatment providers and others are assigned to opioid “hot spots” and assist overdose survivors in the recovery process.

By:
Friday, November 16, 2018 at 02:12 PM

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