



The Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force is committed to being a leader in identifying issues faced by all people affected by mental illness, facilitating improvements in mental health services, giving consumers and families a strong voice, reducing stigma, and implementing recovery principles.

Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force Testimony Milwaukee County Mental Health Board Meeting

Delivered by Nicole Damiano – MHTF Steering Committee September 27, 2023

Joined by Barbara Beckert and Sally Smaida, Disability Rights Wisconsin

Thank you, Chairwoman Perez and Mental Health Board members for this opportunity to provide public comments on behalf of the Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force (MHTF).

By way of background, the Mental Health Task Force was established in 2004. The MHTF works collaboratively to identify issues faced by people affected by mental illness and by substance use disorders, facilitate improvements in services, give consumers and families a strong voice, reduce stigma, and implement recovery principles. The MHTF includes over 30 community organizations and comprises service providers, individuals who live with a mental health or substance use condition, advocates, family members, and other stakeholders. Task Force co-chairs are Mary Neubauer and Christine Apple.

We appreciate the opportunity to share our frontline perspective with the Mental Health Board and Behavioral Health Services (BHS) leadership at this challenging time in our community. Many of our community members are struggling with their mental health, with substance use disorders (SUD), and to access basic needs including food, medication, and safe, decent housing. An increasing number of adults and youth with mental health needs are in our jails and prisons. We thank BHS staff and other service providers for their work to provide essential support and services to address these needs.

Mental Health Care at the Jail

A significant number of the people at the Milwaukee County Jail have a mental illness, and many also receive services from Behavioral Health Services. We are deeply concerned the Milwaukee County and the contracted provider Wellpath cannot adequately meet the mental health needs of those confined at the Jail and Community Reintegration Center. Notably, six individuals have died in custody by suicide within the past 3 years, according to a [September 2023 report](#) to the County Board. These include the December 2022 death of a 20 year old woman with significant mental illness and a history of self-harm. She had been in Jail since February and had repeatedly been on suicide watch over those eleven months. She was actually on suicide watch at the time she died. Admittedly, the Jail staff is under stress, understaffed and under-supervised. In addition, this woman's case was delayed in the court process with several adjournments. As a result, it was practically inevitable that her decompensation and predictable human error would eventually result in a tragedy. For her, and for many others in the Jail with mental illness, we have to continue to ask why they are in jail rather than an appropriate inpatient facility?

Although BHS does not provide mental health services at the Jail, we urge the Mental Health Board and BHS leadership to prioritize efforts to divert people with mental illness from the Jail, connect them with services when they return to the community, and advocate for improvements in mental health services at the jail. We are concerned that shortages of inpatient beds are contributing to the overcrowding at the jail. We must evaluate how many people in the jail could be placed at inpatient facilities and in a therapeutic environment if there was sufficient capacity.

We ask that BHS work with other Milwaukee County stakeholders to implement protocols to identify vulnerable people with mental illness who don't need to be at the jail and ensure they are placed in a therapeutic environment. Without that, more people will die.

We recommend that Mental Health Board review the recent report from the Office of Corporation Counsel on behalf of the Milwaukee County Sheriff's Office and discuss the role of BHS and the Mental Health Board in addressing these concerns. Here is a link to report documents: [Milwaukee County - File #: 23-834 \(legistar.com\)](#)

The Mental Health Board was established with the recognition that the County Board did not have the specialized knowledge needed to be the sole governance body for mental health care in Milwaukee County. For those very same reasons, it is essential that the Mental Health Board and BHS have a role in taking responsibility for community members with a mental illness who end up in Jail.

Waiting for Treatment to Competency

We have continued concern about the number of people waiting to be sent to state psychiatric hospitals for competency treatment, many on misdemeanors. We need to do much more in a preventive way and to support diversion and keep people out of jail while waiting for treatment to competency. Too many people who are waiting lose their housing, their employment, and their community connections. BHS should work with the state to ensure additional resources are available in our community for competency treatment, to reduce the number of people deteriorating in jail waiting to be sent to Mendota for competency treatment.

Mobile Crisis Services

The Milwaukee County Mobile Crisis team has historically been an effective model for responding to a mental health crisis without involvement of law enforcement. As shared in past comments, we remain concerned by the high position vacancy rate in Crisis Services; filling those positions is a top priority. We understand that this is also a priority for BHS leadership and that workforce shortages are a continuing challenge. If the County is unable to fill positions for crisis service clinicians, we ask you to prioritize implementing other approaches to provide these essential services. This could include training other staff to take on mobile crisis role, and including use of well-trained community responders.

Youth Crisis Stabilization

The Mental Health Task Force is concerned about the recent closure of the Youth Crisis Stabilization facility. Given that Milwaukee County has seen an increase in the number of youth experiencing significant mental health challenges and that many of these young people are referred to the youth justice system, it is puzzling that this service was underutilized. We see an increasing need for

community-based support for youth experiencing a mental health crisis and had supported establishment of the Youth Crisis Stabilization service and were pleased to see funding from the state for this service. We are disappointed that Milwaukee County has lost this option to address the clinical and emotional needs for youth in our community who are experiencing a mental health crisis.

Promotion of Listening Session Opportunities

Mental Health Board Public Hearings such as today's meeting are an important opportunity for the Board to hear from members of the public. While we commend the Board for providing these opportunities, attendance has been low. We are concerned that there is still not a communication plan to promote these sessions to the public. We ask you to prioritize development and implementation of a communication plan to promote these public input sessions to the public.

Transitions

In closing, we would like to introduce our new Mental Health Task Force Coordinator, Sally Smaida. She has many years of experience with policy analysis and advocacy working to improve access to healthcare for vulnerable populations, and also serves as the Community Program Coordinator at the Walker's Point Community Clinic. Sally holds a Masters of Public Health Policy and Administration from the University of Minnesota School of Public Health. She is based at Disability Rights Wisconsin. Barbara Beckert, DRW Director of External Advocacy is retiring in October and supporting Sally with this transition. You can reach Sally at sallys@drwi.org.

Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force members are ready and willing to be a resource to BHS and to the Mental Health Board. The MHTF is here to ensure that those in need of mental health and SUD services are treated with respect and dignity, and we stand dedicated to engaging consumers in services that are trauma informed and culturally competent.

Thank you for your consideration of our testimony, and for your service on the Mental Health Board.

Note: Questions regarding this testimony can be referred to Mental Health Task Force Coordinator, Barbara Beckert at barbara.beckert@drwi.org