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Public Policy Memo MPA

The public policy of incarcerating individuals with mental health has been a concerning one. I currently work directly in the mental health field and see incarcerated individuals without due process daily. Currently individuals who are experiencing mental health issues have one option and that option is court ordered that option is going through a competency restoration program which will help deem them competent for trial. These programs miss the mark, the materials are taught by untrained individuals who do not have a clear understanding of mental health in the first place. The structure of the program is demeaning and more of a kindergarten type setting for adult individuals. What continues to happen in these programs is that the individuals are forced to take medication, they are then deemed competent after being medicated for a few months, they get released, then return when the medication wears off or after they are returned to the life of homelessness they came from.

Currently, I do see some progress. There are individuals who make strides in their restoration and instead of contracting this restoration process DSHS is currently taking over this internally. This does help, having qualified individuals working with the patients makes a difference. People with empathy, understanding, and a clear purpose of helping people are what is getting these programs to be successful. Currently there is a True Blood settlement that has also helped correct this issue. People were sitting in isolation for months waiting to participate in a competency program. Some longer than their sentence would have been for the crimes they were arrested for. This settlement has pushed Washington state to take this more seriously and they have now been getting people into programs within seven days instead of seven months. Unfortunately, it has taken seven years for this to become a reality and Washington state is paying the price with millions of dollars in pay outs.

I think a great alternative to this issue is providing adequate facilities to assist people prior to incarceration. These should be state funded outpatient facilities who do outreach to the homeless

community since they are the population that seems to have this reoccurring issue. Adequate opportunity for housing, easy access to their medications, and supported housing, education, and work placement. People need purpose and to feel a sense of belonging. Having someone by their side especially when they are experiencing mental health symptoms can make the difference in whether they end up incarcerated or homeless. Addressing these issues prior to incarceration would save millions of dollars and millions of lives.

In addition, this is not something that can be corrected overnight. With an emphasis on healing, understanding, and proper community I believe it is something that can be accomplished.