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## **Decline in Hillsborough County inmate population linked to Mental Health Court**

*By JOSEPH G. COTE Staff Writer*

NASHUA – If there's one number James O'Mara likes to see go down, it's the number of people spending the night in his jail.

O'Mara said the average daily population at the Hillsborough County Department of Corrections is down about 60 people – and dropping still – from what he was projecting at the start of the fiscal year.

"My population is down significantly," said, O'Mara, the jail's superintendent. "My population continues to decline as we speak."

O'Mara gives much of the credit for the smaller number of inmates to the Community Connections Mental Health Court, which in the last year has expanded to cover all five of the Hillsborough County's district courts.

The mental health court, which started at Nashua District Court in 2006, is now in the district courts in Merrimack, Milford, Manchester and Goffstown thanks to a \$200,000, two-year grant from the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Assistance.

This grant is set to expire soon, and officials are trying to petition state legislators to include funding of the program, which they say will save money for taxpayers in the long term.

"Quite honestly, if we're not funded by the county, I don't think the program will continue," said Susan Stearns, director of development at the Greater Nashua Mental Health Center.

O'Mara agrees and has requested \$100,000 in his budget proposal to fund the program on the county level.

"I believe people are being diverted and that there is a tangible cost savings to the county," O'Mara said. "I believe it's incumbent on me to support and continue that."

By Stearns' calculations, the program saved more than 12,000 days in jail, an average of 33 beds a day, by diverting 235 people out of the jail and into treatment

programs last year. That's a savings of about \$60,000, Stearns said, and doesn't include other cost factors such as medication.

"All the savings are at the county house of corrections level," Stearns said. "What it comes down to is it's more fiscally responsible. It costs more to keep people in jail. It would be fiscally irresponsible to not fund it. It will cost more money."

O'Mara said that in March, the highest the population got to on a single day was 537, low enough that he could soon close a portion of the jail. That would result in significant savings, he said, because it would lower the number of staff needed during a particular shift.

"If the numbers continue to trend downward, we would be able to reconfigure and consolidate the existing space, resulting in the closure of a housing unit," O'Mara said.

O'Mara's belief in the court goes deeper than that. The court doesn't just save money, he said, it is a more effective and responsible way to deal with people with mental illness when they run afoul of the law.

"On a different level, for the last 20 years, local detention facilities have been the dumping ground for mentally ill individuals. No one know what to do with them, and they know I can't say no when they're at the door," O'Mara said. "There is a clear trend in the law enforcement community that there are better strategies with greater long-term gains in the appropriate placement of people with mental illness when they come into contact with the criminal justice system."

Hundreds of people have graduated from the mental health court in Nashua. Now, enough people are enrolled that the court holds specific mental health court sessions. It's not your typical court hearings.

First of all, Nashua District Court Judge James Leary, one of the leading forces in the creation of the Nashua court five years ago, sits behind a bench in the juvenile courtroom downstairs from where most hearings are held. He's as likely to know the names of the dozen or more people who committed minor crimes because of mental illness and their doctors as he is their infractions.

On a recent Wednesday, around 10 people piled into the room after catching up and chit-chatting with one another in the waiting room. All had the chance to talk with Leary about their treatment, when they were next scheduled to see their doctor, any issues they've had making appointments or getting prescriptions filled, finding a place to live or a job.

"What I'm concerned with is that they're doing whatever it is they need to do," Leary said. "It works. When they comply and do what they're supposed to, it works."

It's working for Joe Garcia. Garcia suffers from bipolar disorder and hallucinations. He was arrested by Nashua in October for allegedly selling prescription pills downtown. Garcia said he doesn't remember doing much of what he's accused of doing.

"I don't remember it. None of it," he said. "My picture was in the paper with people I don't even know."

Since he's enrolled in the mental health court, he hasn't missed a single doctor, therapist or mental health court appointment, a remarkable feat for many people in the program.

"It did something to me. I don't know what, but it straightened me the hell out," Garcia said. "I spent two weeks in jail, and it almost killed me. I would have never made it up there. If it wasn't for this program, I would have never made it."

Judge Norman Champagne, the leader of the mental health court at the Manchester District Court, said the court's first two graduates completed the program two weeks ago , roughly a year after it began.

"The program, as far as I can tell, has been very successful," he said. "I think there's a need to recognize the mental health aspect of these cases, and that's what the mental health court allows us to do. Hopefully we can get the money somewhere to continue."

Joseph G. Cote can be reached at 594-6415 or [jcote@nashuatelegraph.com](mailto:jcote@nashuatelegraph.com).

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