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ADMINISTRATOR'S OFFICE  
NEWS RELEASE



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## Call to Action to Reduce, Treat Inmates with Mental Illnesses

**GRAND RAPIDS** – Adults with mental illnesses tend to stay longer in jail, and upon release are at a higher risk of returning than people without these diseases. This makes it difficult for these individuals to hold jobs or find stable housing, and it becomes a burden on taxpayers. Kent County Sheriff Larry Stelma has long worked with mental health professionals, developing diversion programs to address the issue. Today, the Kent County Board of Commissioners joined the Community Mental Health Authority Board (network180) and other community partners in signing a Call to Action to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in the Kent County Jail by participating in a national initiative called **Stepping Up**.

Studies show the rates of people with serious mental illnesses in jails are three to six times higher than for the general population. The **Stepping Up** program encourages public, private and nonprofit partners to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in jails. “Michigan is leading the way in this effort. County jails often provide treatment services to those with serious mental illnesses, and almost three-quarters of these adults also have substance use disorders,” said Board Chair Dan Koorndyk. “Through this initiative, Kent County is truly stepping up its responsibility to protect and enhance the health, welfare and safety of residents in efficient and cost-effective ways.”

The **Stepping Up** plan includes efforts to:

- Convene a team of leaders and decision makers committed to reducing the number of people with mental illnesses in jails;
- Collect and review data and assess individuals’ needs to better identify adults entering jails with mental illnesses and the risk of returning to jail;
- Determine which programs and services are available in the county for people with mental illnesses and co-occurring substance use disorders;
- Identify policy and funding barriers to minimizing contact with the justice system and providing treatment and supports in the community;
- Implement research-based approaches that advance the plan.

The team will also create a process to track progress using data and information systems, and to report on successes. “Unfortunately, without the appropriate treatment and services, people with mental illnesses continue to cycle through the criminal justice system, often resulting in tragic outcomes for these individuals and their families,” added Sheriff Stelma. “Kent County continues to look for innovative, evidence-based solutions to help these adults get the help they need to stay out of jail and lead better, healthier lives.”

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On average, inmates with mental illnesses cost two to three times more than those without treatment needs. “We have a moral responsibility as well as a fiscal charge to implement **Stepping Up** in Kent County,” said Commissioner Harold Mast, network180 Board Chair. “Treatment of those suffering from mental illness in our jail system is critical for the health and safety of those housed or working in the jail and for those who come in contact with them after they are released.”

**Stepping Up** was created in partnership with the National Association of Counties, the Council of State Governments Justice Center and the American Psychiatric Foundation.

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