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ESSEX COUNTY CORRECTIONAL FACILITY CIVILIAN TASK FORCE ISSUES EVALUATION REPORT ON MENTAL HEALTH CARE IN LOCAL AND COUNTY JAILS

Essex County, NJ – The Essex County Correctional Facility (ECCF) Civilian Task Force has released its CY2024 Mental Health Report, unveiling critical insights and recommendations for improving mental health care within local and county jails across the United States. The report highlights a pressing issue: mental health challenges are pervasive nationwide, affecting approximately 20 percent of adults, or about 50 million individuals, with 2.45 million facing severe mental illness (SMI).

In New Jersey, 16.37 percent of adults grapple with mental health issues, underscoring an urgent need for enhanced resources and access to care. ECCF exemplifies this trend, now housing more individuals with SMI than any psychiatric hospital in New Jersey, illustrating the jail's increasingly vital role in managing mental health crises.

The report outlines several key recommendations to address these challenges:

- **Universal Screening and Assessment:** Implement evidence-based mental health screenings at intake using standardized tools to ensure early identification of mental health issues, substance use disorders, and trauma.
- **Multidisciplinary Teams:** Build and maintain a team of mental health professionals experienced in working with diverse populations. Ensure continuous training in mental health, trauma, and de-escalation techniques for all jail staff.
- **Individualized Treatment Plans:** Develop individualized treatment plans for each incarcerated person with mental disorders, incorporating a range of evidence-based practices and therapeutic approaches that consider cultural, socioeconomic, and specific mental health needs.
- **Integrated Treatment Programs:** Address the high prevalence of co-occurring disorders through integrated treatment programs. Establish strong partnerships with community-based services to ensure continuity of care during and after release.
- **Therapeutic Housing Units:** Create therapeutic housing units and foster a supportive jail culture to enhance mental health and well-being, encouraging inmates to seek help when needed.
- **Telehealth Services:** Implement telehealth services to expand access to mental health professionals and specialists.

- **Data Management Systems:** Develop a robust data management system to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of mental health programs.
- **Peer Support and Community Connections:** Involve peer support specialists and strengthen community connections with local organizations and advocacy groups to provide additional layers of support and mentorship.

Regular evaluation of mental health interventions, informed by data and feedback from participants and staff, is essential for continuous improvement. By committing to these strategies and prioritizing mental health care, ECCF can make significant strides in improving outcomes for incarcerated individuals with mental health needs, ultimately contributing to safer communities and better public health outcomes.

Professor Valera, who led the evaluation report, emphasized, “Addressing the complex needs of individuals with mental health challenges confined at ECCF requires a comprehensive strategy encompassing early identification, expanded staffing, targeted policies, and enhanced training.” The report also highlights that while New Jersey has made progress in addressing mental disorders in jails, there are still notable obstacles. Sustained investment in mental health services, training, and interagency cooperation is crucial to enhancing outcomes for jailed individuals with SMI.

The report suggests employing the Sequential Intercept Model (SIM) to map how individuals with mental health challenges navigate the criminal justice system, identify resource gaps, and plan systemic changes. It also notes that global mental health approaches for incarcerated individuals increasingly emphasize diversion, rehabilitation, and integrated care services to address mental health needs, aiming to improve outcomes and reduce recidivism.

Task Force Chairman Governor Jim McGreevey remarked, “The ECCF 2024 report highlights three key needs in mental healthcare: 1. To establish a Health Information Exchange to track participation in addiction treatment and mental healthcare, ensuring all providers have comprehensive patient histories; 2. To urgently improve early mental health diagnosis in medical systems and the criminal justice system, along with coordinated and ongoing treatment; 3. to create regional mental health 'step-down' units to offer clinically-driven alternatives to jail for individuals facing episodic mental health challenges.”

The intent of the nine-member task force is to provide “transparency and accountability” of the ECCF staff, to protect the “lives, health, safety and rights of all people confined at the ECCF” and ensure the “conditions of their confinement are safe, sanitary, respectful and humane,” according to language in the ordinance. It will act independently of County government and have the authority to inspect the ECCF, interview corrections officers, inmates, detainees, and review systematic issues and concerns.

Members of the Task Force were nominated by Essex County Executive Joseph N. DiVincenzo, Jr. and appointed by the Board of County Commissioners in June 2020 through an established advice and consent procedure that is used to fill vacancies on all county boards and commissions.

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