

TRANSPORT IN CRISIS: SAFETY ISSUES IN THE TRANSPORT OF MENTAL HEALTH CLIENTS

March 22, 2007

Summary

Mendocino County Department of Mental Health, by order of the Board of Supervisors, opened the Crisis Service Center (CSC) in October 2001. The 2006/2007 Grand Jury conducted an investigation of the Crisis Service transport system for clients detained under California Health & Safety Code §5150 (§5150). The Grand Jury found opportunities for corrections and improvements in the transportation system.

Background

Section 5150, among other things, establishes the grounds for detention upon probable cause of a person dangerous to themselves or others, or who are gravely disabled as a result of mental disorder. The person can be held for evaluation and treatment for up to 72 hours. In Mendocino County a Department of Mental Health Crisis Worker makes this determination.

In November of 2000, the Board of Supervisors closed the only Psychiatric Health Facility (PHF) in the County. In October 2001, in its place, they opened a Crisis Service Center (CSC) in Ukiah. Currently there are additional offices in Willits and Fort Bragg. However, persons who are declared incapacitated under §5150 must be transported to a psychiatric health facility out of the area. Initially Sheriff's deputies provided this transportation. The Crisis Service developed a transportation system to drive clients to psychiatric facilities out of county relieving the Sheriff's deputies from that duty. Mental Health Department policy requires when transporting a §5150 client to a detention facility, the sending facility will establish a level of safe transport. The Grand Jury looked at safety issues in the Crisis Service transportation system.

Currently, clients may walk into the Ukiah CSC for counseling, Case Management and other Mental Health Services between the hours of 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. The door is locked after 11 p.m., with two staff present. On weekdays after 5 p.m., and during weekends, calls to the Willits office are routed to the Ukiah CSC. On the Coast after 5:00 p.m., and on weekends, crisis services are provided by contract with the Ford Street Project.

Sheriff Deputies bring clients showing possible grounds for detention under §5150 to the nearest hospital: Mendocino Coast District Hospital (MCDH), Frank R. Howard Memorial Hospital (Howard), or Ukiah Valley Medical Center (UVMC).

They are examined by medical staff and a Crisis Worker is summoned to make a determination of mental status.

If a §5150 determination is made, a Health Service Worker/Driver (HSW/driver) is called to stay with the client; the Crisis Worker returns to the office to arrange a bed in a psychiatric facility out of the area. If the client is not determined to be §5150 they are free to leave the hospital. The medical staff determines when a person is stable enough to be transported to an available appropriate psychiatric facility. After hospitalization, the CSC is called to send a driver to return them to the CSC for an exit interview. After the exit interview, the client may be served by a "Bridge" team of Department of Mental Health staff to determine what additional services are required

Methods

The Grand Jury interviewed Management of the Health and Human Services Agency, Management and Supervisory staff of the Mental Health Division, Supervisors and staff of the Crisis Service. They visited the CSC, viewed the three vehicles used for transit in Ukiah. The following documents were reviewed:

- the 2001/2002 Grand Jury report on mental health
- the County Mental Health Budget
- current policies and procedures of the Crisis Service
- a memorandum of understanding among the three hospitals, the Department of Mental Health and law enforcement.

Findings

1. Crisis Services are State mandated but do not receive earmarked State funding.
2. Many Crisis Service clients are indigent, Medi-Cal ineligible, and have no insurance or financial resources, making the County responsible for costs incurred by the client.
3. Management and supervisory staff reported that Crisis Services are underfunded. Non-competitive staff salaries make hiring and retaining qualified staff difficult.
4. The Ukiah CSC currently employs five permanent HSW/drivers (one female) and seven Crisis Workers. An additional Crisis Worker and female HSW/driver are being recruited as extra- help employees.
5. Willits has two Crisis Workers, and one Client Services Specialist who may drive on occasion.
6. The Fort Bragg office is staffed by one supervisor, three Crisis Workers and seven HSW/drivers whom are called as needed. This office is currently recruiting for an additional Crisis Worker.
7. Extra-help HSW/ drivers are paid only for the hours they work.
8. Night staff at the Ukiah CSC lock the door for safety at 11 p.m.; they may be reached by telephone.

9. The Grand Jury heard testimony that additional female drivers are needed to transport women and children.
10. Under contract the Ford Street Project provides after-hours on-call Crisis Workers for the coast. The Grand Jury heard testimony that they receive less supervision and training, resulting in some Crisis Workers being less qualified.
11. Many clients have a dual diagnosis of mental illness and addiction problems.
12. Many clients have chronic conditions and have been repeatedly hospitalized.
13. The Grand Jury heard testimony that current training of drivers does not meet the requirements of the Crisis Services Policy Manual.
14. Testimony revealed differing opinions of management, supervisors, and staff regarding the suitability of the vehicles used to transport clients in crisis to out-of-County facilities.
15. The vehicles the Grand Jury observed in Ukiah are Ford Taurus compact sedans; these had been modified by the installation of safety panels fabricated at the County garage where the vehicles are serviced.
 - a. The safety panels between the driver and passenger do not cover the lower part of the drivers seat.
 - b. The safety panels, in some vehicles, have plexiglas in the upper portion which make communication between the driver and client difficult.
 - c. The rear seat is narrow and may be uncomfortable for persons of more than average weight or height.
 - d. The leg room between the front and rear seats is very limited.
16. Mendocino County Mental Health Department has contracts for clients at hospitals located in St. Helena, Santa Rosa, Sacramento, Yuba City, and other parts of the State. Many of these locations require travel in excess of three hours each way.
17. The cell phones that drivers use for communication do not function for much of State Route 20 from Ft Bragg to Ukiah and through parts of Lake County.
18. The Grand Jury heard testimony that the quality of after-hour services for crisis clients at MCDH is inconsistent.
19. The "Client Transport Request and Report Form" given to drivers by Crisis Workers at Fort Bragg may not be completely filled out.
20. Neither MCDH nor Howard has provided a mental health protocol for assessment and treatment of clients of the Crisis Service as required by the MOU signed in May-June 2003 by the Department of Mental Health, the three Hospitals and the Sheriff and three city police chiefs.
21. Testimony indicated that clients at MCDH may be disrobed and gowned for medical examination or to prevent leaving without permission. The clothing may or may not be searched or returned to them before transport. Clients are occasionally transported in a hospital gown.
22. Crisis staff may not touch or restrain clients, only peace officers have that authority by law.

23. If either the driver or client requires the use of a restroom, depending on the escape risk of the client, drivers must locate a police station, a hospital, or provide a portable urinal.
24. HSW/drivers have learned to call and alert their destination to insure a second person is available to escort the client into the facility.
25. Much of the training of new HSW/drivers is received from their trips with experienced drivers; they are also given a written manual of department policies.
26. There is an average of eight clients from Mendocino County hospitalized out of the County at any given time.
27. Staff at all levels report their work is stressful and potentially dangerous. They believe they are providing a necessary service and like their jobs.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that:

1. the salary schedule for crisis staff be adjusted to be comparable to other rural counties.(Findings 1-7, 10)
2. the after-hours procedures of the Ft. Bragg Crisis Services be reviewed and improved. (Findings 10, 18, 19)
3. as funding becomes available, the transport vehicles be replaced with ones equipped with more comfortable rear seats, roof to floor barriers, internal communications systems, and dash board video cameras facing the rear seat. (Findings 12, 15 a-d)
4. cell phones be replaced with a communication system that can reach local law enforcement. (Findings 9, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 22, 25)
5. a video camera be installed at the entry to the CSC. (Findings 8, 11, 12)
6. mental health protocols be developed for the MCDH and Howard. (Findings 1, 2, 10, 11, 18, 20, 21)
7. the Health and Human Services Agency meet with Howard Hospital management to develop a residential psychiatric unit in the new Frank R. Howard Memorial Hospital to serve the Northern California Counties. (Findings 1, 2, 16, 26)

Comments

Closing of the PHF in Mendocino County in 2000 did not remove the need for local residential psychiatric services. It resulted in the need for an extensive, quality, transport system for mental health clients in crisis. Currently the transportation system for the Crisis Service is not always safe and effective. The Grand Jury recognizes a hard working dedicated staff that provides humane, compassionate services for their clients.

Responses Required

Mendocino County Board of Supervisors (Findings 1-3, 12, 14, 15a-d, 26-27; Recommendations 1, 7)

Mendocino County Sheriff (Findings 11-12, 17, 22-23; Recommendation 4-5)

Ft Bragg Police Department Chief (Findings 7, 11-12, 17, 22-23; Recommendation 4)

Ukiah Police Department Chief (Findings 11-12, 17, 23; Recommendation 4-5)

Willits Police Department Chief (Findings 11-12, 17, 22-23; Recommendation 4)

Health and Human Services Agency Director (Findings 1-3, 11-17, 20, 26-27; Recommendations 1-7)

Mental Health Division Director (Findings 1-27; Recommendations 1-7)

Medical Supervisor Emergency Departments of:

Ukiah Valley Medical Center (Findings 2, 11-12, 23)

The Mendocino Coast District Hospital (Findings 2, 11-12, 18, 20-21, 25; Recommendation 6)

Frank R. Howard Memorial Hospital (Findings 2, 11-12, 20, 23, 25; Recommendation 6)