

THE BUFFALO NEWS

Another Voice: There's a Mental Health Crisis in Our Correctional Facilities

John Garcia, Erie County Sheriff

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Since taking office as the Erie County Sheriff, I am astounded at the significant number of incarcerated individuals remanded to the custody of the Sheriff's Office who suffer from psychiatric and behavioral disorders. Approximately 57% of the total population within the facilities have an active forensic mental health diagnosis.

These individuals rely heavily on medical and mental health programs, placing an additional strain on the services provided within our facilities. Due to limited mental health resources available in the community, many arrive with little or no treatment related to these conditions.

Jails were constructed to house people who made poor choices and put our community at risk; they were not built to care for large numbers of incarcerated individuals with serious mental illnesses (SMI). These increased demands on jail management include longer stays with increased disruptive and aggressive behaviors that present unique challenges within the jail.

Additionally, incarcerated individuals with both mental illness and substance abuse disorders present an even more significant treatment challenge, requiring more intensive counseling, treatment and supervision by medical and security staff.

Due to insufficient funding and a lack of available community resources, jails and correctional facilities are often referred to today as "Modern Asylums." As such, laws have been enacted at the state and federal levels to ensure all individuals receive appropriate treatments for SMI while incarcerated. Unfortunately, it's difficult or impossible to effectively provide these additional services to our population within the constraints of antiquated facilities.

Given the uptick in mental health cases, the local medical community faces similar challenges. A lack of sufficient inpatient treatment facilities capable of managing these individuals leads to a delay in proper treatment, further stresses our already overburdened jail system, and increases the risk to the incarcerated individuals and staff alike. These risks include suicide threats or attempts, self-injurious behavior, and both physical and nonphysical assaults on staff, such as exposure to urine or feces.

Many studies have shown individuals with an SMI diagnosis have higher recidivism rates. This is the result of several factors, including unstable post-release housing, unemployment, and limited community mental health resources. In addition, these individuals often fail to follow up for services when released from custody, leading to decompensation and return to the criminal justice system.

History shows the criminal justice system has been more inclined to punish these individuals with mental illness than provide the mental health services they require. Imagine if society were to incarcerate people with

dementia or Parkinson's disease. How long would it take state or local governments to pass reform legislation?

In closing, I want to stress the need for the local community to support my efforts to increase and modernize the services available to those incarcerated individuals with severe mental illness. The Erie County Sheriff's obligation to effectively and comprehensively treat those individuals with SMI necessitates the construction of a modern correctional facility to meet the current and changing needs of our future population.

I strongly recommend increasing inpatient treatment capabilities with our local partners and funding to assist community treatment programs to ensure this segment of the population rightfully receives the treatment they deserve.

John C. Garcia is Erie County Sheriff.