

Virginia

State mental health focus shifts to justice system

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By MICHAEL MARTZ Richmond Times-Dispatch



A Virginia senator plans to carry legislation to create a special court docket for military service members and veterans, as state policymakers begin to shift their focus from psychiatric emergencies to mental health issues in jails and the criminal justice system.

Sen. Linda T. "Toddy" Puller, D-Fairfax, said Tuesday she intends to introduce legislation to create a special veterans court docket, working with the Virginia Supreme Court.

Deeds

Veterans court dockets have become more common across the country as the justice system struggles to deal with criminal charges involving military veterans with mental health and substance abuse issues.

"A lot of mental health issues are related to the justice system, there's no doubt about it," said Secretary of Health and Human Resources Bill Hazel.

Creation of an intergovernmental center for behavioral health and justice emerged as a major focus of the task force Gov. Bob McDonnell named and Gov. Terry McAuliffe continued to examine the state's mental health system after the son of state Sen. R. Creigh Deeds, D-Bath, stabbed his father and then killed himself almost 13 months ago.

Hazel pitched the concept of the new center among 25 task force recommendations presented to a new joint legislative subcommittee led by Deeds, who has vowed to repair the mental health system he said failed his 24-year-old son, Austin C. "Gus" Deeds, in November 2013.

The McAuliffe administration is developing the concept of the center as a way to increase collaboration between public safety and behavioral health agencies. The center also would pursue task force recommendations to require jails to offer mental health services for inmates and notify communities when a person with a behavioral health diagnosis is released from custody.

The lack of mental health treatment in jails and inadequate community care once people are released were among major concerns in a report by the Office of the Inspector General early this year. The report found that jails have become the largest residential institution for people with mental illness in Virginia.

Hazel faced similar issues in a separate task force meeting on Tuesday about prescription drug and opiate abuse that also challenges jails and the justice system.

"They don't get better with jail treatment; they get better with substance abuse treatment," he said of inmates with drug addictions.

The Deeds subcommittee, created this year to study mental health services in the 21st century, also took stock Tuesday of progress made since the senator's family tragedy prompted a major overhaul of the state and local system for dealing with psychiatric emergencies.

Gus Deeds stabbed his father and shot himself 13 hours after being released from an expired emergency custody order because the regional community services board failed to find a bed for him in a private or public psychiatric

hospital.

A law took effect July 1 to extend the emergency custody order from six to 12 hours. It requires state mental hospitals to accept people after eight hours if they are found to pose a threat to themselves or others, and no private hospital bed is available.

The state also imposed protocols on community services boards that require them to report within 24 hours if any person who meets the criteria for a temporary detention order is not properly detained for evaluation.

Hazel cited five cases in the first three months of the fiscal year, but each case involved special circumstances, such as medical complications that also prevented state hospitals from accepting the person for detention and evaluation. In each case, the temporary detention order ultimately was executed and the person was detained, he said.

"That's progress," Deeds said.

The state also included about \$9 million in the two-year budget to expand the number of secure "drop-off" centers where law enforcement officers can take people in psychiatric emergencies for evaluation. Six centers were funded this year, including one at Bon Secours Memorial Regional Hospital in Hanover County. The state hopes to establish 20 more in the next fiscal year.

The psychiatric bed registry created in March after years of state delay has shown mixed results, Hazel said. The Web-based registry is used an average of 2,500 times a month and includes information about available psychiatric beds at 69 hospitals and crisis stabilization units, but state officials say it is hard to provide the information in "real time."

"I'm not diminishing what it does, but I'm also saying you have to be realistic about what you can expect from it at this point," he told the subcommittee.

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