Sharen Wilson
Criminal District Attorney

Contact: Anna Tinsley Williams, Communications Officer
atwilliams@tarrantcountytx.gov
(817) 884-3120(w); (682) 299-8079 (cell)

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Key moment for mental health in Tarrant County

(Fort Worth, TX) – A long-term plan to create a mental health jail diversion center – and provide an alternative to putting people with mental health needs behind bars – appears to be on the fast track.

Tarrant County Judge Glen Whitley said Tuesday during the Commissioners Court meeting that he would like to see the facility, geared to get the mentally ill the medical attention they need, open by October 1, 2021.

County officials have talked about the need for such a facility for years.

"This will make a huge difference in how we do criminal justice in our community," said Sharen Wilson, Tarrant County's criminal district attorney, a key advocate of this effort. "The mentally ill, for the most part, should not be in our jails. This gives them an opportunity to not be there."

A mental health jail diversion center would be a partnership that involves the county, JPS, MHMR and law enforcement.

It would give law enforcement officers a place to take someone who, for instance, could have been detained for criminal trespassing – or another non-violent, low-level crime – but who instead might have mental health issues that need to be addressed. That person no longer would have to go to jail.

Instead, they could be taken to this center where they could stay while MHMR and community partners find the best facilities for them to get help for psychiatric needs, homelessness, medication management, health issues, and more.

As a result, there would be fewer inmates at the Tarrant County Jail and in the criminal court system – and fewer people in hospital emergency rooms.

"We recognize the county jail is not the place for one to regain one's mental health," Tarrant County Commissioner Roy Brooks said during Tuesday's meeting. "This is truly a diversion program. These people will never hit the front door of the jail. … The objective of this center is to stabilize this person and do a warm hand-off to community-based care."

The question now is which entity will pay for the center – and which will manage it.

Whitley noted that those are important questions to answer at a soon-to-be scheduled workshop. But for now, Tarrant County Administrator G.K. Maenius said he will engage a real estate agency to find an 18,000- to 20,000-square-foot rental facility in Tarrant County to house this facility.

"It's what is best for everybody," Wilson said. "It's best for police, the courts, the county, and for the individual and their families.

"We just need it."