

Human Services Committee Members;

My name is Jesse Jahner, and I am the Sheriff in Cass County, North Dakota. As the Sheriff, my staff and I oversee the Cass County Jail, which has a current capacity of 348. Over the past year, the Cass County Sheriff's Office has collaborated on multiple occasions with various community partners to discuss and attempt to resolve gaps in the mental health services available in Cass County and statewide. That collaboration has included local hospitals, legislative members, service providers, representatives from state agencies, and local law enforcement. We have discussed alternative options for obtaining care where a need is identified. We have considered modifications to various stakeholders and providers' processes to work towards improved access and improved outcomes. Significant gaps still remain for those patients who have needs that are not or cannot be effectively treated in the community, and that would qualify for commitment to the state hospital. We are experiencing year over year increases in the number of people who end up in jail for serious offenses that threaten public safety and have limited access to psychiatric care. Of even more considerable concern is the number of people with such acute and immediate needs that hospitalization is deemed necessary by all parties, including the local human service center.

The number of referrals that we make in Cass County for the required pre-screening assessment has risen each year over the past few biennia, as have the number of persons who have been admitted into the state hospital. We feel that we have a strong sense of the commitment criteria and only refer those people that a qualified mental health practitioner has assessed for appropriate referral. Even more frustrating are the increasing instances where the process has determined that a person meets the criteria for admission to the state hospital, but there is no room. The access is denied or delayed beyond what is established in state law.

We have had Inmates sit in the Cass County Jail for up to as much as two weeks who were not committed due to capacity issues. This has been a recurring theme on several occasions throughout 2020. North Dakota Century Code requires us to move such persons out of jail within 24 hours of an issued commitment order. Still, we have experienced delayed entry and, on occasion, access denial because of resource issues. This delay from pre-screen to transfer has occurred in cases ranging from a few days to 13 days, and in one case, 31 days total before admittance occurred.

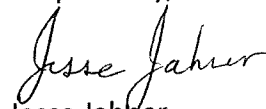
The pre-screening process should determine the condition of the patient and not an assessment of the conditions at the hospital. Suppose people are being denied access after a determination has been made that they do need hospitalization. In that case, at least some of the decisions that a person does not require hospitalization must be partially impacted by capacity considerations.

There are instances in Cass County where pre-screens were approved, commitment paperwork submitted, and then a delay led to expiration of the commitment paperwork and the need to repeat the process. There have also been instances in Cass County where pre-screens have been completed. Still, days or even a week passes before commitment paperwork is completed and submitted, which we are told was due to capacity issues.

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has complicated everyone's situation at every level in this continuum of care. But the numbers show that we are also dealing with an increase in cases of significant and even severe need of care. One of the striking observations we have made this year is the increased number of people landing in jail who are already open and active patients of the local human service center, who are subsequently determined to need acute care. These are not cases where it is appropriate or safe to release the individual back on to the street through the bond process. Multiple cases of residential arson, barricading with weapons, attempting to run over people and law enforcement with vehicles, aggravated assault and possession of explosives, and one person who was digging up the grave of a family member due to delusions. What we are seeing is that the need for additional capacity is greater than ever before.

I write this testimony and provide this information because I do not want to see services cut from the North Dakota State Hospital. When we see the need for additional capacity and services more than ever before, I respectfully ask that their budget is increased to meet the demand for those needing services. When Individuals receive services through the State Hospital, we see a dramatic difference in their mental health wellbeing. This is a testament to the type of work they are doing there. Please move to approve an increased budget and provide them the appropriate funding for the services they need to effectively treat those with mental health issues and, in doing so, keep our communities and citizens safe.

Respectfully,



Jesse Jahner

Cass County Sheriff