

Key Informant Interview **Judge Heather Morse**

As part of the Santa Cruz County Mental Health Department's (CMH) needs assessment efforts for their strategic planning process, on November 21, 2014 the interviewer, Jerry Solomon, PhD, met with Judge Heather Morse, who regularly presides at the Behavioral Health Court (BHC) in Santa Cruz County, to discuss her perception of the services currently being offered by Santa Cruz County Mental Health to the seriously mentally ill (SMI). In particular this interview explored the strengths and weakness of programs for the SMI who have been through the criminal justice system. Identified needs are highlighted.

The BHC is a post-adjudication adult program with the goal of keeping the mentally ill out of jail and in treatment in the least restrictive environment. The objective is to find the "most respectful intervention" that addresses each individual's unique needs.

The court, working closely with CMH's MOST program, the Probation department, and the District Attorney, provides the "muscle" and oversight to ensure that individuals are compliant with the conditions of their release and/or probation.

Judge Morse stated that she is very pleased with the successes she has witnessed as well as the collaboration that exists between the various departments. She had nothing but praise for Erik Riera, Director of CMH and Jasmine Najera (Program Manager for the Jail).

She states that she's seen good success with individuals who have graduated from Casa Pacific, Eldorado and Second Story.

Unfortunately, there is no BHC equivalent for minors. Juvenile Court oversees those cases and has had good success with Tyler House and SCORE. Judge Morse observed that the most challenging cases are those that involve co-occurring mental illness and substance abuse disorders.

One aspect of CMH's program that Judge Morse sees as essential for success is the availability of case management services and Client Coordinators.

In Watsonville it is essential to address the cultural challenges that create shame and a reluctance to engage in treatment. Judge Morse noted that many of the treatment programs in Watsonville must be more culturally sensitive to client needs.

Identified Needs

- The availability of client coordinators for minors. School is a critical anchor for the youth that Judge Morse encounters and many parents are unable to navigate the school system's rules in order to obtain services and create a pathway back to school for their children. There is a significant need for educational case managers.
- Create treatment programs for individuals who are seriously mentally ill and have a co-occurring substance disorders. Judge Morse doesn't believe sending a person to a substance abuse/AA program without addressing the underlying psychological causes of the disorder is very helpful or sufficient.
- More safe, affordable housing.
- Better drug treatment options.
- More psychiatric medication for substance abuse clients with co-occurring disorders, but with much greater oversight.
- Increased treatment options that have demonstrated efficacy.
- More culturally sensitive programs that actively address shame/stigma.
- General community-wide educational efforts to destigmatize mental illness.