

Headline: State Lawmakers Want To Overhaul Mental Health Programs

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Publication: *California Healthline*
Date posted: June 11, 2014

State lawmakers have pitched a multi-million dollar plan to overhaul mental health programs in the criminal justice system -- at a time when many people are calling for ways to head off more violence like the Isla Vista rampage. This is *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. I'm Deirdre Kennedy.

The mental health proposal is based on a new study that calls California's prison system a warehouse for the mentally ill. Stanford's Three Strikes Project published the report and State Senate President Pro Tempore Darrell Steinberg presented its findings and recommendations at a press conference last month.

(Steinberg): "The Stanford report lays out three key priorities for addressing the callous and inhumane warehousing of people with mental illness in our criminal justice system. One, reform the way we sentence people with mental illness. Two, provide more meaningful treatment and three, establish a process and criteria for humane releases."

The new approach would fund additional mental health courts and calls for more lenient sentencing for non-violent offenders with the option of going into a community-based mental health program.

Steinberg's announcement came on the heels of last month's mass shooting in Isla Vista near Santa Barbara, when a 23-year-old man with a history of mental illness killed six people including himself. Democrat Hannah-Beth Jackson represents the state Senate district where the shootings took place.

(Jackson): "How do we stop this before it happens? This was a young man whose mental illness was right out there on YouTube and right out there on Facebook and in screeds that he posted on blogs and yet no one did or was able potentially to recognize the behavior, the potential for violence that resulted in this mass set of murders."

Officials say laws are already on the books to prevent such violence in future. For instance, anyone can report that someone is in danger of harming themselves or others.

And Los Angeles County, for one, has already improved its mental health screenings at intake and expanded its diversion programs. Kathleen Piché, spokesperson for the Department of Mental Health, says DMH staff work in tandem with the courts to make sure that every single person who goes through the system has access to treatment. The county can make recommendations but it can't medicate inmates without their consent.

(Piché): "The program will assist anyone with a mental illness. That would include creating and securing treatment alternatives to incarceration, as well as any needs while they're in jail. The court liaisons work intimately with mental health staff in these efforts too."

Los Angeles requires crisis intervention training for all first responders and it also trains its public library staff how to handle a mental health crisis.

It has also deployed special mental health teams to 18 cities across the county that respond to 911 calls involving behavior or mental issues. Linda Boyd is a program manager of the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health who says mental health professionals can often spot behavioral problems that might not be apparent to police officers at the front door.

(Boyd): "The one disease that we still give people the right to make choices about is when their brain is really ill and we say it's OK, you still can choose to have this horrible quality life. And yet I'm not in favor of forcing treatment on everybody."

The National Alliance on Mental Illness encourages families to inform public health agencies and police of any history of troubling behavior. Under California law, police can detain someone for observation for 72 hours if they pose danger to themselves or others. Ratan Bhavnani is executive director of NAMI in Ventura County.

(Bhavnani): "Privacy is important, but health privacy laws sometimes stand in the way of treatment for folks with mental illness. We teach family members to provide information and when someone's brain is not working well, as in the case of mental illness, these privacy laws mean nothing."

Boyd says if police in Isla Vista had watched the threatening YouTube videos the suspect's parents reported, they could have confiscated his weapons and kept him off the street. Meanwhile, the fate of Steinberg's spending plan will be clear when the state budget negotiations finish this month.

This has been an audio report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at CHL@CHCF.org. I'm Deirdre Kennedy, thanks for listening.