

CUCS Academy Newsletter

Academy for Justice-Informed Practice <academy@cucs.org>

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Event Spotlight

COVID-19, Decarceration, and Behavioral Health: Where We Are and Where We're Heading

On June 9th, 2020, The Academy hosted a virtual panel discussion on the impacts of COVID-19 on New York City's behavioral health and criminal justice systems. The panel of legal and clinical experts focused on the vulnerabilities and corresponding needs of justice-involved people with serious mental illness in or returning to the community. Panelists also discussed the economic, health, and social effects of COVID-19 and remote care for direct service providers and their clients.

The panel was moderated by Dr. Merrill Rotter, Director of EAC and NYS OMH Forensic Psychiatrist, who opened the discussion with an overview of the changes to the city's jail population since early March. He explained the measures that have been taken to decarcerate NYC's jails and reduce the spread of COVID-19 in correctional facilities and local communities.

Next, Colleen King, Senior Staff Attorney with the Brooklyn Defender Services' (BDS) mental health team, discussed how COVID-19 has affected how mental health criminal defense attorneys represent, serve, and build relationships with clients and their families. Before COVID-19, when a client was arraigned, a BDS attorney and social worker would meet their client and invite the client's family and service provider to join them in court. The shift to virtual client meetings and court proceedings makes it more difficult for defense teams to collect client information before an arraignment and assess their client's ability to comprehend information in virtual appearances. Social distancing measures create barriers to attorney-client communication because many clients don't have phones with data plans and there is limited access to video conferencing booths in jail. Ms. King placed special emphasis on creating discharge plans for clients with serious mental illness; discharge planning should both involve social workers, correctional health services, and the Community Re-entry Assistance Network (CRAN) and address housing, transportation, healthcare, and other basic needs. When preparing for possible release, Ms. King suggests scheduling a video conference with the client and the community provider so that the client knows who is going to be there to help them navigate their transition to the community.

Next, Dr. Foellmi, Senior Clinical Director of Forensic Mental Health at EAC, addressed changes in service delivery and client interaction at CRAN amid COVID-19. CRAN provides re-entry assistance and voluntary services to all incarcerated people returning to New York City, including: providing food and access to transportation; picking up medication and scheduling medical appointments; assistance with obtaining housing and benefits; and making referrals to supportive and community services. CRAN is comprised of two programs: Assistance Network Services (ANS), which offers short-term “one-stop shop” release services to anyone discharged from Rikers Island, and Community Transitional Case Management (CTCM), which provides 6 months of case management services to reentering individuals with serious mental illness. Pre-COVID-19, CRAN case managers had regular in-person meetings with incarcerated clients and conducted in-reach groups on Rikers Island to inform potential clients about the services available to them upon release. Currently, their staff is not allowed on the island due to the suspension of all in-person visits. Recent trends in CRAN client referrals reflect the city’s criminal justice response to the pandemic. During the height of COVID-19, when more people were coming out of Rikers and CRAN had no direct access to incarcerated people, ANS referrals increased while referrals for CTCM decreased. The effects of COVID-19—including the rise in unemployment, delays in obtaining housing, and the temporary closure of referral organizations and treatment centers—intensified pre-existing challenges for re-entering people and their service providers. Although most services are now remote, CRAN’s Brooklyn office remains open for health and mental health screenings as well as for clients without phone access or with serious health concerns. If organizations plan to make greater use of telehealth services beyond COVID-19, Dr. Foellmi said, clients and staff need greater access to phones, technological assistance, and other remote resources.

Finally, Dr. Elizabeth Ford, Medical Director of CASES, talked about CASES response to COVID-19 and the organization’s plans moving forward. CASES, Dr. Ford said, “Attempts to provide as many services as possible for the individuals it serves”; these services include: ATIs, education, employment, youth-based services, ACT, IMT, and FACT teams, and a clinic that specializes in serving justice-involved people with serious mental illness. CASES transitioned to remote work in mid-March and now offers 85 to 90 percent of its services remotely. In-person services are still available to walk-in clients, clients without remote access, and to clients who require injectable medication, blood monitoring, and other services with no virtual substitute. Determining which clients receive in-person services requires weighing the risk of infection against the issues that could arise if a client’s care becomes remote. Dr. Ford addressed some of the challenges that COVID-19 poses to care providers and service delivery; these include: emotional and physical health of staff; limited or no in-person sessions; limited access to collateral clinical information from Rikers; reduced access to psychiatric hospitalization; and the temporary shutdown of services in New York City. Recent changes to HIPAA regulations, CMS payment policies, and telehealth consent requirements have helped staff deal with these challenges. Moving forward, CASES plans to incorporate telehealth more permanently into care for some of its clients.

Highlighted Resource

THE CUCS BENEFITS CENTER IS HERE TO HELP!

Dear Service Partners: We know that you and your clients have a lot of questions, and we want to help!

BENEFITS COUNSELING FOOD STAMPS, MEDICAID, CASH ASSISTANCE & SSI/D

- CUCS assesses maximum public benefits eligibility
- Answers any questions and advises regarding benefits issues
- ACCESS HRA Cash & SNAP applications
- Expedited Food Stamp (SNAP) Enrollment
- Medicaid enrollment via the New York State Health Exchange
- Assistance with navigating SSI/D application process

LEGAL ADVICE ON CIVIL MATTERS Legal Aid Society gives assistance on matters such as:

- Eviction prevention
- SSI/public benefits appeals
- Employment issues
- Immigration
- Family law issues, including custody, child support and domestic violence.

WHAT CAN I EXPECT ONCE A REFERRAL IS MADE?

Once referral is made to the CUCS Benefits Center with the client's name, DOB and contact number; staff will contact clients and will work collaboratively with referral partners to provide the above services.

For further information about our program initiative or to make a referral, please contact:

Kelsey Ferrari (kelsey.ferrari@cucs.org), Assistant Program Director

or

Nicole Quinn (nicole.quinn@cucs.org), Program Director

****Attorneys and Paralegals will NOT provide advice or representation on CRIMINAL matters****

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