

HEALTH BEYOND HOSPITALS: Health and the Department of Corrections

Co-Host Sites: Anchorage and Juneau, Alaska

June 18, 2008

During the past five years of Health Caucus forums, awareness of the health roles filled by the Department of Corrections has grown. Initially, when studying the Economics of Health in September 2006, the Caucus learned that the funding source for prisoner health care comes from the State's General Funds. Since those who are incarcerated are very often are without insurance and have not had regular medical care nor learned preventative habits, their care can be a costly expenditure. Representative Andrea Doll co-hosted the June forum on "Health Beyond Hospitals" because of her work and study on Correction's issues. The growth of those entering Corrections with mental health disorders matches the decrease of community mental health provision, as the forum presenters discussed. Continued study of this issue can have important influence on health policy development.

Presenters:

Dwayne Peeples, Deputy
Commissioner for Administrative
and Medical Services, DOC

Joyce Degroot, Corrections Quality
Control Nurse, DOC

Joe McLaughlin, MD, MPH State
Epidemiologist and Chief, Alaska
Section of Epidemiology, Division
of Public Health

Susan Jones, RN, MN, Public
Health Specialist, Section of
Epidemiology, Division of Public
Health

Laura Brooks, MHCIV, Director of
Mental Health Services, DOC

Janet Forbes, Gastineau Human
Services Center

Rosalie Nadeau, Executive
Director, Akeela, Inc.

Marc Wheeler, Vice President of
Programs and Operations, Big
Brothers Big Sisters of Alaska

The Department of Corrections (DOC)

Dwayne Peeples and Joyce DeGroot

Deputy Commissioner Peeples presented on two major issues that DOC is facing: the overcrowding of state correction facilities and the high number of prisoners who have mental health issues.

Overcrowding

In November of 2008, the Department of Corrections was housing 3,733 prisoners across the state in facilities with a maximum capacity totaling only 3,183. Wildwood Corrections at the time housed 125 prisoners in a Pre-Trial facility with a maximum capacity of 112. Mat-Su housed 100 charges in facilities with a maximum capacity of 85. This shortage of beds has meant that in some facilities prisoners must sleep in gyms. These statistics illustrate the stress on the DOC's administrative system to provide and care for prisoners it doesn't have room for. DOC must deal with approximately 38,000 separate bookings per year.

Mental Health

The Mental Health Trust conducted a 2007 study of those in DOC custody, and found that about 40% are Mental Health Trust beneficiaries. The Department of Corrections has become the single largest mental health provider in the state. The average costs to house prisoners instate is now at \$129.00 per day. With mental health care in DOC, costs per



prisoner are much higher —especially as the untreated often re-offend. With an institutional system ill-equipped to combat the ‘revolving door’ of re-offending, the costs to the state will continue to climb.

DOC has been able to hire two new staff in the mental health area in 2008, but it is still significantly understaffed. They have two psychiatrists and two psychologists which are necessary, but insufficient to handle the number and types of clients that continually return. Substance abuse cases that are deferred to therapy courts have reported very positive results. A mental health court that could divert the mentally handicapped from the prison system is expected to be set up by June, 2009.

Joyce Degroot presented a picture of corrections overcrowding and the resulting health issues. She also joined in the discussion on epidemiology.

Epidemiology in Prisons

Dr. Joe McLaughlin gave a detailed explanation of the epidemiology of Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), specifically in Alaskan prisons and other correction centers throughout the state.

MRSA is a bacterium that is commonly carried on the skin or in the nose of healthy people, colonizing in approximately 25-30% of the general population. It causes minor skin infection but can also cause serious infections such as in surgical wounds and blood streams. It is common to contract pneumonia. About 12 million outpatient health care visits in the U.S. are attributed to MRSA.

MRSA’s scientific name means it’s resistant to the certain antibiotics. Those are beta-lactam antibiotics, which include methicillin, oxacillin, penicillin, and amoxicillin. Approximately 88%



*Wildwood Pre-Trial Facility in Kenai
Capacity: 113; November 2008 client load: 125*



*Anchorage
Correctional
Complex*

*Alaska
Psychiatric
Institute
Capacity: 72*



of MRSA infections are healthcare associated. This proportion of Staph aureus infections has risen from two % in 1974 to 22% in 1995 and 64% in 2004. Community-Acquired MRSA occurs in otherwise healthy people who have neither been hospitalized nor had a medical procedure in the last year. Most people who are infected in the prison system have Community-Acquired MRSA. The most common manifestations of MRSA are wound infections, urinary tract infections and bloodstream infection. Up to 6% of these infections become invasive. Invasive MRSA has a mortality rate of approximately one in five.

Most state do not require the reporting of MRSA because of the burden this places on healthcare practitioners and laboratorians. The role of public health officials in intervening in MRSA outbreaks is very unclear. Alaska reporting regulations do not require the reporting of MRSA infections. As with any infectious disease, however, an unusual number or clustering of MRSA would warrant report.

MRSA in Prisons

Known risk factors for MRSA include close skin-to-skin contact, openings in the skin such as cuts or abrasions, contaminated items and surfaces, crowded living conditions and poor hygiene. Prisoners are an identified risk group, with the likelihood of infection most prevalent in longer incarceration. These include prior antibiotic use, gender (female), washing clothing by hand, not using soap to wash, comorbidities, self draining of boils, sharing towels and razors, and tattoos obtained in prison.

The literature on MRSA is unclear on what would constitute an outbreak of MRSA in a prison population the size of Alaska's. Currently the Division of Public Health (DPH) asks all healthcare providers to report unusual incidence of infectious disease, and DPH determines if an outbreak investigation is needed.



*Mat-Su Pre-Trial Facility
Capacity: 85
November 2008 client load: 100*



Yukon Kuskokwim Correctional Center Capacity: 92

Susan Jones, Public Health Specialist, reported on Socially Transmitted Diseases (STDs) in Alaskan prisons. The bacterium Chlamydia is the most frequently reported STD in the United States. Alaska has the highest rate in the nation. Although patients frequently do not have symptoms, Chlamydia can cause complicated infections and infertility in women. The bacterium Gonorrhea is the second most reported STD in the US. Men have symptoms, but women frequently are asymptomatic. It can cause complicated infection and infertility in women and men. Both Chlamydia and Gonorrhea are easily treated with antibiotics.

Testing for STDs in Alaska Adult Correctional Centers:

Approximately ten percent of the total incarcerated population in Alaska is tested, mostly in Anchorage facilities. Inmates are tested when symptoms, or knowledge of exposure, is apparent or when a population is identified through risk assessment by correctional staff. Also testing may be indicated through public health disease investigators. Testing rates vary across the state due to limited resources and personnel. In 2007, testing in Alaskan adult correctional centers found eleven percent of those tested for Chlamydia and three percent of those tested for Gonorrhea were positive. Tests were also conducted for HIV. Sixteen percent (5 of 31) were positive. All of these tests were in Anchorage correctional centers. Some of the newly identified may have been infected for a long time. Susan Jones said that more testing is indicated by those high percentages.

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Spring Creek Correctional Center in Seward Capacity: 500+



*Wakefield
Correctional
Center*

She spoke regarding her concerns that the continual decline of social help and prevention has a direct correlation to the rise of overcrowding in our correction facilities.

*-- Laura
Brooks*

The data suggests that the large number of robberies indicate expensive drug use, while assault is often linked to heavy alcohol use.

*-- Rosalie
Nadeau*

Laura Brooks, Director of Mental Health Services, DOC

Since Laura Brooks began working with the Department of Corrections in 1998, she has seen a dramatic increase in the prison population mental health conditions that have matched a decrease in necessary treatment resources available in our communities. She spoke regarding her concerns that the continual decline of social help and prevention has a direct correlation to the rise of overcrowding in our correction facilities.

Rosalie Nadeau, Executive Director of Akeela, Inc.

Akeela is a 501 (c-3) organization offering prevention, substance abuse and mental health services to the people of Alaska. Akeela provides a variety of programs: residential substance abuse treatment, women's programs, outpatient programs, prison programs, transition housing programs and prevention programs.

The Akeela House is a long term (12 -18 month) residential substance abuse recovery center. It is a therapeutic community residential center using a family system to provide rehabilitation in a non-judgmental environment. The inpatient program is for those whose level of alcohol or other substance dependence has seriously disrupted their daily functioning. The inpatient programs assist individuals in overcoming barriers to recovery.

Offering outpatient services, Akeela also is designed with an understanding that individuals are complex and unique. They provide flexible programs tailored for specific cases to cope with ongoing conflict and work through marriage or family tensions. The staff addresses the substance use problem or addiction and complies with court orders to receive treatment to reinstate the driving privileges, or for other reasons.

Akeela received its first funding increase in many years in FY08, after 16 years of gradual budget reduction. This additional \$60,000 from the State puts Akeela back to a funding level it last had in 1992. In that time, however, costs have grown significantly despite Akeela's status as a nonprofit, which allows it to

operate at a cost considerably lower than a for-profit or State-financed facility. In 1992 Akeela was able to serve 40 clients; now Akeela can serve 22 clients.

Rosalie Nadeau and other nonprofit representatives discussed costs and treatment options with State personnel at the forum. The present financial crunch has forced DOC to increase bed space and eliminate treatment plans. The population of the prisons has increased steadily in the type of crimes that indicate what is happening ‘on the streets.’ This is accomplished by understanding the increase in certain kinds of prisoner profiles. The data suggests that the large number of robberies indicate expensive drug use, while assault is often linked to heavy alcohol use. Those present from DOC and private nonprofit treatment centers all agreed that there is just not enough staffing to deal with alcoholism. Warehousing alcoholics and the mentally ill happens because of the inadequate funding available for community-based and mental health institutional expansion. As a result, substance abuse treatment is moved to the back burner.

Marc Wheeler, Vice President of Programs & Operations for Big Brothers Big Sisters of Alaska, Amachi Alaska

Amachi is a national program of Big Brothers Big Sisters, created with the purpose of providing professionally-supported one-to-one mentoring relationships for children with an incarcerated parent. In Alaska, as of June 2008 Amachi has made 26 new matches statewide.

Of the more than 1000 children currently served by the program, 13% have an incarcerated parent. The goal of Amachi is to create 100 new mentoring relationships every year for the next three years across Alaska. Through its work, Amachi Alaska hopes to stop the intergenerational cycle of incarceration.

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-- Rosalie Nadeau

Studies show that youth with an incarcerated parent are more likely to wind up in the criminal justice system

-- Marc Wheeler

Youth who are matched with a mentoring adult for a year or longer are:

52% less likely to skip a day of school

46% less likely to start using illegal drugs

27% less likely to begin using alcohol

33% less likely to use violence