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# District Attorney Announces Funding for New Mental Health Diversion Program

*Initiative Will Steer People Away from Jail and Into Treatment*

The San Diego County District Attorney's Office announced funding today for a new initiative that will divert people with serious mental illness away from the justice system and into treatment, the first of its kind in the County. The program received support today from the County's Board of Supervisors, which authorized a contract to receive \$3,328,000 in grant money from the Department of State Hospitals (DHS). The funding will establish San Diego County's first formal pre-trial mental health diversion program, expanding community-based treatment and reducing the number of people who cycle through psychiatric crisis and jail due to untreated mental illness.

"There needs to be a sea change in the way we address the needs of people living with mental illness in our community who find themselves involved with the criminal justice system," said District Attorney Summer Stephan. "Today is another big step forward in a progressive new approach that is improving the way the criminal justice system handles individuals with serious mental illness, while still keeping our neighborhoods safe. It is also an example of the dynamic innovation and collaboration between our justice partners and Behavioral Health Services here in San Diego. An important focus of this grant initiative was providing equal access and equitable treatment for participants with serious mental illness and providing an evidence-based humane solution to the complex intersection of mental health, homelessness and criminal justice. I want to thank our County's Public Safety Group for coordinating the grant application as well as Dr. Luke Bergmann, Director of Behavioral Health Services, for his continued partnership."

Recognizing the significant nexus between mental health, substance abuse and criminal justice, the District Attorney's Office brought more than 200 stakeholders and experts together to map the intersection of mental health, homelessness and criminal justice, to better-identify problems and recommend concrete solutions.

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As a result, the DA released its Blueprint for **Mental Health Reform: A Strategic New Approach Addressing the Intersection of Mental Health, Homelessness and Criminal Justice in San Diego County** last year, which includes system reform recommendations to improve public safety outcomes. The 70-page document contains 30 specific recommendations for how law enforcement and the justice system can better respond to people facing mental health challenges, including the pre-trial diversion program that got the green light at today's Board of Supervisor's meeting.

California law allows a court to postpone criminal prosecution for up to two years, under certain circumstances, and instead refer individuals to community-based treatment that meets their specialized mental health needs. The DSH funding supports county diversion programs for a particular subset of all people who may be eligible for mental health diversion: individuals charged with felonies, with diagnoses of schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, and bi-polar disorder, who are at risk of being ruled incompetent to stand trial.

Partners in the proposed mental health diversion program include the District Attorney's Office, the Sheriff's Department, the Public Defender, the Health and Human Services Agency, the Probation Department, and the Superior Court. The program design is based on San Diego County's successful Behavioral Health Court, and will provide, among other things, Assertive Community Treatment, wraparound services, case management, life skills, medication management, benefits assistance, peer support and community linkages. The funding will support treatment and housing for approximately 30 participants at any given time during the contract period.

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**About the San Diego County District Attorney's Office**

*The San Diego County DA's Office prosecutes all felony crimes in the county and misdemeanor crimes committed outside the City of San Diego. The office files about 40,000 criminal cases a year and balances prosecution with numerous crime prevention programs. District Attorney Summer Stephan leads the office of more than 1,000 dedicated employees who pursue fair and equal justice, and support victims daily across San Diego County.*