



Investing in Social Services as an Alternative to Criminal Justice: The Restoration Center Commission

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is engaged in deep reflection and consideration of action on a fundamental problem: too many people are not well served by our health and social services systems, and as a result default to police intervention, with too often harmful outcomes. A carefully researched and reliably vetted solution is offered in response to this challenge.

The Middlesex County Restoration Center Commission was created in S. 225 of Chapter 69 of the Acts of 2018, "An Act Relative to Criminal Justice Reform" to divert people with mental health and substance use conditions from arrest and/or unnecessary hospitalization. The goal is to invest in social services to prevent unnecessary law enforcement interactions. The Commission is co-chaired by Middlesex Sheriff Peter Koutoujian and Danna Mauch, PhD, President and CEO of the Massachusetts Association for Mental Health. Representation on the Commission includes public health stakeholders and criminal justice entities like the Association for Behavioral Healthcare and the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Massachusetts; the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, MassHealth, the Department of Mental Health, and the Bureau of Substance Addiction Services; a police chief and a judge with deep knowledge of the mental health commitment laws; and legislators Senator Cindy Friedman and Representative Ken Gordon.

In its first year, the Commission reviewed the mental health system and the criminal justice diversion programs that exist in Middlesex County and produced a report containing a gaps analysis. The report found that people with mental health and substance use conditions (collectively referred to as "behavioral health conditions") are disproportionately involved with the criminal justice system, caused in part by underinvestment in behavioral health and social services and a lack of a coordinated system for diversion from the criminal justice system. Insufficient mental health and substance use treatment and conditions of poverty and homelessness leave individuals and their families desperately seeking care through a last resort: 911. Commissioners found that a restoration center could provide behavioral health urgent care and social services that could prevent criminalization of individuals with social and medical service needs.

In its second year, the Commission contracted a behavioral health provider organization to develop a service model and budget for a restoration center in Middlesex County, which it published in its second annual report. The model includes: a sober support unit, which can provide short-term detoxification and real-time linkage into the substance use treatment continuum; crisis stabilization services to provide urgent psychiatric support; residential respite, which provides a medically-monitored place to stay while explicitly planning for follow-up housing and healthcare arrangements; and social services navigation and placement to ensure that people using the center have a coordinated plan for the future that can prevent future police involvement.

The model proposed in the report is estimated to cost \$3.28 million annually to operate. In state fiscal year 2021, the Commission seeks \$140,000 in funding for planning purposes. The Commission's Year One Findings and Recommendations also include related recommendations that would help further the goal of social service investments as an alternative to criminal justice systems, like commercial coverage of Emergency Services Providers.