



COUNTY OF YOLO
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date: April 7, 2022

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Yolo Mental Health Court: Then and Now

Alejandro Zambrano successfully graduated from Mental Health Court

(Woodland, CA) – On April 7, 2022 – Alejandro Zambrano was at rock bottom when he was arrested by Davis Police on July 12, 2017, for felonious assault on a police officer. At 48-years-old, the Army veteran was homeless, was living with bipolar disorder and PTSD, and was addicted to methamphetamine. He was heading towards state prison. One month after his arrest, he was found incompetent to stand trial and sent to Napa State Hospital. When he returned to Yolo County on June 11, 2018, he was referred to Mental Health Court. Though his crime was violent, prosecutors examined his case, including video evidence from a police body camera during his arrest. His assessment found him to be a high risk, but he was admitted into the program and the Mental Health Court team jumped into action. Zambrano persevered through the 18-month intensive program and graduated on June 17, 2021. At his graduation, Zambrano told the Mental Health Court team, “Thanks for what you are doing. I also want to thank you all for giving another chance in life.”

Mental Health Court is a minimum 18-month court-based treatment and monitoring system for adult offenders with serious mental illness. Mental Health Court is designed to increase the treatment engagement of the participants while reducing both arrests, hospitalizations, and jail time both during and after their involvement and participation in the program. The program is a collaborative effort between the Yolo County Superior Court, Probation, Health and Human Services Agency, the Public Defender, and the District Attorney. Mental Health Court follows the Forensic Assertive Community Treatment model where participants get intense services two hours per week or meet with staff four times per week. The team provides participants with wrap-around treatment, which includes a focus on mental

health, substance abuse, housing, employment, education, and physical health. The goal is to address the criminogenic factors and reduce recidivism. At the end of the program, individuals participate in a restorative justice conference.

When Zambrano entered MHC, there was a cap of 15 participants. In early 2018, the County team added Addiction Intervention Court (AIC) which serves those suffering from substance use disorders and has a cap of 30. Many in these programs have co-occurring disorders where they live with both a serious mental illness and a substance use disorder. For MHC and AIC, referrals are made by the individual's defense attorneys sometimes after the suggestion by the District Attorney. Team members do not object to referrals and all team members must agree that an individual is suitable after an assessment by the "Treatment Team" (Probation and HHSA). To date, there have been hundreds of recommendations of suitability from the Treatment Team, and on every recommendation but two, the team has been in full agreement. The DA and Probation each objected on one occasion due to public safety concerns.

In Spring 2019, the County was awarded the Justice and Mental Health Court grant which increased the cap for MHC to 30. The District Attorney led the team efforts in drafting the grant and the District Attorney administers the grant. This grant expires on October 1, 2022, and the hope is that to continue the program, the financial void will be filled by Yolo County's Mental Health Services Act dollars. Subsequently, in Spring 2019, the County was awarded another grant from the CA Department of State Hospitals (DSH). This grant was again drafted by the District Attorney, with input from other team members, and is also administered by the District Attorney. Funding for these grants goes to treatment team members from Probation and Health and Human Services. The goal of this grant is to serve individuals who commit crimes who need a higher level of care and are incompetent to stand trial (IST) or at risk of IST. These individuals normally would be treated at state hospitals such as Napa State Hospital. The goal of the DSH grant is to divert these out of the traditional prosecution and treat them in the community. The cap at a given time for this program is 8 participants.

More recently, the District Attorney and Public Defender believed there was an underserved population of those suffering from less serious mental illness. With that in mind, the District Attorney drafted a proposal in coordination with the Public Defender and, along with the support of Probation, submitted a request to the Yolo County Community Corrections Partnership (CCP) for funding for a Mental Health Diversion (MDH) program. The CCP granted the request making funding available for a Deputy Probation officer, a Deputy District Attorney and Public Defender, and a team of treatment providers from Communicare Health Centers. This program was launched and in February, 2022 and already has four participants with the goal of reaching 30-40. Judge Janet Gaard, who helped bring MHC to Yolo County, has

come out of retirement to serve as the Mental Health Diversion judge. “Mental Health Court was my favorite judicial assignment. Being part of the team working together to help these individuals was so fulfilling. I’m so pleased to be back and see County partners have added additional programs that will be able to serve so many individuals who really need treatment, rather than punishment.”

Currently, MHC and AIC are not at full capacity. The DSA grant is at full capacity and the Mental Health Diversion grant, as it is new, has many openings. For those who do not qualify for these programs, the District Attorney’s Restorative Justice Partnership (formerly Neighborhood Court) also accepts individuals living with mental illness and/or substance use disorders. The DA’s Restorative Justice Partnership, with their assigned social worker, connects these individuals to services and housing. Currently there are 27 individuals in this program who are receiving case management services through Medi-Cal.

Yolo County Supervisor Jim Provenza praised the robust treatment-based options in Yolo’s criminal justice system for those living with mental illness. “I’ve spoken to my colleagues across the state and I’ve yet to see another county with criminal justice partners who are so dedicated to decriminalizing and treating those who live with mental illness,” said Provenza. “What is highly unusual is the excellent partnership between the District Attorney and Public Defender – all team members seem to be rowing in the same direction.”

A results-based assessment conducted by Health and Human Services during fiscal year 2020-21 showed significant accomplishments. During the 12-month period after enrolling in Mental Health Court, participants had a 73% decrease in arrests, a 93% decrease in jail bed stays, a 35% decrease in local hospital bed stays, and a 100% decrease in state hospital bed stays.

Zambrano was back in court on November 10, 2021. On that date, Judge Peter Williams dismissed his case. “When I entered mental health court, I was at rock bottom. When I graduated I was on the mountain top. My sobriety and success in life started after graduating. I owe so much to the team including helping me get my driver’s license. I have been clean and sober and I have published a book, Healing Through Poetry, which offers a message of hope to all.”

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