



## Howard County Leverages Data and Existing Resources to Build a Diversion Center

When Stan Parker became Howard County Sheriff in 2009, the county's efforts to address people involved in the justice system with mental illness was brought to the forefront of the community.

Sheriff Parker and his team helped forge close collaboration with the local mental health authority (LMHA), established telemedicine in the jail, enhanced staff training, and implemented a mental health deputy and jail caseworker program. Through this effort, Patricia Watlington, now the deputy director of behavioral health at West Texas Centers, was hired as the jail's first caseworker. Together, they became aware of a missing piece in this community: a diversion center to prevent people with mental illness from being booked into the jail altogether when appropriate.

With funding from the MacArthur Foundation, the LMHA, West Texas Centers, held a Sequential Intercept Model (SIM) mapping workshop in 2022 with stakeholders across criminal justice and behavioral health systems to form the Howard County Jail Diversion Committee. As part of this effort, they examined local data which revealed that 20 individuals with mental illness were being booked into the Howard County jail per month, and over 75% of those bookings were for non-violent charges. This data led Sheriff Parker and his team to find solutions in diverting people with mental illness away from incarceration and into behavioral health services and programs.

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West Texas Centers built upon its existing services and programs to stand up a diversion center in September 2023 to serve Howard County and several adjacent rural counties. The Jail Diversion Committee emphasized that collaboration across stakeholder groups was essential in successfully standing up the diversion center. The committee prioritized engaging with law enforcement, meeting weekly to ensure diversion practices promoted community safety while remaining efficient for officers. Early and thorough engagement with law enforcement helped to foster systemwide buy-in and allowed law enforcement to “put their stamp” on the center while enhancing cooperation across the pre-arrest diversion landscape.

The diversion center provides individuals with 23 hours of services and safety monitoring. People brought to the center are greeted by a [peer support specialist](#) who guides them through assessments and transition with support and empathy. West Texas Centers focuses on integrating the peer role for daytime staffing and contracts with [The Wood Group](#) to provide overnight staffing for the facility.

The diversion center can leverage an existing resource, the adjacent crisis respite center, for people dropped off by law enforcement who require a lengthier intervention. “We really do want to stop that cycle

of coming in and out of jail in crisis, and going into inpatient crisis hospitalization, and then also stop the cycle of lack of engagement for our outpatient services,” Watlington said during a webinar highlighting community diversion centers in Texas.

This goal of breaking the cycle was further reinforced by a success story described by Sheriff Parker: “We had one guy here that had been in and out of jail 272 times over a three-year period. They [caseworkers] were able to provide wraparound services and I don’t think he’s been in jail in two or three years now. He’s doing pretty well.”

West Texas Centers offers ongoing case management and treatment services to everyone brought to the diversion center. Staff lower barriers to continuity of care services by completing eligibility and intake workflows during the 23-hour period when clients are in the center. Those who accept ongoing support are automatically placed on Level of Care 5 services for 90 days, which enables them to receive intensive stabilization services within the crucial post-crisis window. After 90 days, the Level of Care is reassessed to place the client on the most appropriate tier of services to ensure ongoing stability and success in the community.

By leveraging their existing services, gaining community buy-in, prioritizing peer-led care and collecting useful data, West Texas Centers secured a three-year grant from the Bureau of Justice Administration, receiving \$550,000 through the [Justice and Mental Health Collaboration Program](#). West Texas Centers also receives funding from [All Texas Access](#), a program from the Texas Health And Human Services Commission (HHSC) Rural Mental Health Initiative and private funding for special projects.



## Additional Resources

- [Planning for Diversion: A Texas Diversion Center Workbook](#) was developed by the HHSC Office of Forensic Coordination to support planning for Texas jail diversion centers that serve justice-involved people.
- [Implementing a Mental Health Diversion Program: A Guide for Policy Makers and Practitioners](#) was created by Justice System Partners and uses former Harris County Judge Ed Emmett’s work as a case study for designing and implementing a mental health diversion program.
- [A Community Guide for Development of a Crisis Diversion Facility](#) is a product of Health Management Associates and Arnold Ventures. It provides guidance on developing a crisis diversion facility and uses case studies from out-of-state programs.
- The [Police-Mental Health Collaboration Toolkit](#) was developed by the Bureau of Justice Assistance to encourage law enforcement and the mental health care system to collaborate to “respond effectively to and improve access to services and supports for people with mental illness and intellectual and developmental disabilities.”



## Diversion Workflow

