



MEDIA RELEASE

OFFICE OF COUNTY MAYOR GLENN JACOBS

400 Main Street, Suite 615, Knoxville, TN 37902

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Feb. 6, 2023

Contact: Mike Donila Abbey Harris
306-1177 cell 215-4579 office
705-1681 cell

Knox County to Establish Mental Health Court Through State Grants

KNOXVILLE, Tenn.— Knox County is in the process of establishing a mental health court for adult defendants who have serious and persistent mental illnesses.

The court would link people to individualized treatment as an alternative to incarceration and strengthen the justice system's ability to identify, assess, and monitor the participants. Additionally, the move would improve public safety by ensuring that participants receive high-quality, community-based services.

"I'm extremely excited about a mental health court becoming a reality in Knox County and would like to thank the exploratory committee for their hard work," Knox County Mayor Glenn Jacobs said. "Sadly, mental health issues often play a role in perpetuating the cycle of incarceration. Not only will this court allow us to identify individuals in need and connect them with services that will help them, but disrupting that cycle of incarceration means less crime and fewer victims."

Similar courts were established across the country beginning in the 1990s and there are about 300 of them. The concept, however, is fairly new in Tennessee, which has only seven such mental health courts. Knox County would become the eighth – something Knox County Mayor Glenn Jacobs and Knox County Criminal Court Clerk Mike Hammond began working to get up and running roughly a year ago.

Mayor Jacobs first appointed an exploratory committee to address feasibility. The county also applied for funding from the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.

"I am extremely pleased the committee has taken the time to lay the groundwork for a mental health court," Hammond said. "This will be another step forward in helping the justice system provide services and treatment for persons with mental illnesses and their families."

At the February Knox County Commission meeting, board members will review the contract, which is for start-up funds of \$52,500 from a state grant. With Commission approval, the money should arrive by the end of March.

Until then, officials will work with the state to establish a detailed framework for the court. The county also will seek additional funding for next fiscal year. Pending County Commission approval of the second contract, the mental health court could begin operation in August.

Mental Health Courts are specialized court dockets designed for individuals with serious mental illnesses and other related psychiatric disorders that utilize a problem-solving model as opposed to the traditional criminal court processing. These courts are designed to serve as an alternative to incarceration by addressing the underlying issues that led to an individual's arrest through judicially supervised treatment plans developed by a team of court staff and mental health professionals.

The goals of the Knox County Mental Health Court include improving the quality of life for participants; reducing incarceration and recidivism; reducing correction costs; and improving public health and safety; and increasing treatment accountability and success.

During the past several months, the exploratory committee conducted conference and zoom calls with leaders in the field of mental health courts including the Eleventh Judicial District Criminal Mental Health Project in Miami-Dade County, Fla., and the New York City Mental Health Diversion program. On site visits were conducted in Nashville-Davidson, Bradley, and Hamilton counties. The committee has sought input from local agencies, service providers, and mental health professionals.

The exploratory committee is comprised of the following members:

- Mike Hammond Criminal Court Clerk as Chairman
- Charne Allen, District Attorney General
- Sam Lee, Chief Deputy District Attorney General
- The Honorable Chuck Cerny, Division 1 General Sessions Court
- The Honorable Steve Sword, Division 1 Criminal Court
- Eric Lutton, Knox County Public Defender
- Wright Surgenor, Director of Social Services, Knox County Public Defender's Office
- Jonathan Cooper, Private Defense Bar
- Alex Brown, Chief Deputy Criminal Court Clerk Office
- Candace Allen, McNabb Center
- Leann Human-Hillard, McNabb Center
- Mona Blanton-Kitts, CEO McNabb Center

###