

New Mental Health Program Launches

By: Katy Reckdahl

The Downtown Development District has been working for years to help resolve social issues that impact downtown. One hundred beds of new low-barrier shelter beds for the homeless are in place. A sobering center is on the way. Last week, another building block will be set into place, in Civil District Court.

“It’s about placing one block at a time, to deal with what we see on the streets, in a state that doesn’t have a comprehensive system of care for those dealing with mental health issues,” said Kurt Weigle, the DDD’s president and CEO.

On Friday, as a brunette woman stood in front of Judge Kern Reese, he told her that she was making history, as the first participant in a new specialty court called AOT, or assistive outpatient treatment.

A local hospital petitioned the court to put the woman into AOT court, to help with her transition home. She had come into the hospital in mentally deteriorated state and had spent two months there stabilizing. The hospital hoped to equip her with the support she needed to prevent future hospitalizations and even arrest.

Her lawyer told Judge Reese that his client had agreed to a treatment plan, which they submitted to the court. The plan outlined what will happen next: where she will live, how she will eat and take care of herself, and — perhaps most importantly — how she will ensure that she keeps up with her medication, so that her condition doesn’t deteriorate again.

An Assertive Community Treatment team contracted by the court also signed onto the treatment plan, supervised by the court. Able to visit her at home every day when necessary, the ACT team provides wraparound services such as medication adjustments, counseling, social support, and assistance with jobs, housing, food, and transportation.

“This is designed to help you,” Judge Reese told her. “I understand you have been receiving treatment and that it’s going well. We’re going to keep that going.”

The new court is one way to help people get the help they need so that people with severe mental illness no longer suffer on the streets of the city.

The Downtown Development District has committed to ramp up the program for five months, by hiring a fulltime coordinator and working with an initial group of

participants: patients who have been treated in a local hospital and are now being released.

When the DDD's pilot AOT court wraps up in May, it will become a full-fledged program supported by \$100,000 built into the 2019 city budget by the Mayor and the City Council.

The first of its kind in Louisiana, the AOT court fills a longtime gap in the city with people who have severe mental illness and have lapsed into psychosis. Though this group of people is relatively small in number, the costs to taxpayers can be more than \$100,000 a year per person if mental illness is left untreated, leaving people to cycle through local emergency rooms, jail cells, and behavioral-health beds in local hospitals. Often, they arrive to these high-cost destinations by police car or ambulance, bringing the costs even higher.

In an AOT court, the treatment plans are ordered and enforced by a judge, in contrast to a long-held concept in mental-health care: that people should seek out help voluntarily. "Some people don't have the judgment or motivation to get adequate mental care," said Dr. Rochelle Head-Dunham, Executive and Medical Director for Metropolitan Human Services District, which will work to provide services for people who come through the court.

These people are gravely sick, but not to the point where they can be committed to a hospital, because they aren't posing a threat to themselves or to others, Dunham said. "They're pretty sick, but they're not dangerous. They're harmful to themselves, because they're neglecting themselves."

STARTING THE PROCESS

A broad group of people — family members, friends, paramedics, or mental-health workers — can petition for an AOT-court intervention if someone they know requires mental-health treatment. "Ideally, we want people to get the care they need as soon as we start to see symptoms," said Janet Hays, head of the advocacy group Healing Minds NOLA, who first brought the AOT concept to the DDD, after it had seen success in other states and cities.

Weigle and his staff started to hold meetings and working toward implementation. "Janet came to us and said, 'This is working elsewhere.' Then we worked with her to get Judge Reese on board," Weigle said. "This is how some of the DDD's most important work is done, by convening people to find good solutions."

Part of the beauty of the process is that participants have a voice in their care, through conversations with the judge about what medications and solutions have worked for them in the past, said attorney Jeff Blue, a former New Orleans Police

Department officer who became part of a working group that studied AOT and advocated for it during a City Council budget hearing.

“Participants can say, ‘I don’t like the way I feel on this medicine,’” Blue said. “When they actively participate, they are less likely to return to the same revolving door that they have been in, likely for years. Where they have a crisis, are picked up by the NOPD or EMS, held for nine days to be stabilized, and then released back to the street, where they immediately become noncompliant with medication, starting the process all over again.”

Throughout the process, mental-health caseworkers and psychiatrists will supervise them, to make sure that they stay on track, keeping them out of the revolving door of hospitals and jails.

“So much of our resources mental health are tied up in the criminal-justice system,” Hays said. “This is designed for people who are caught in that revolving door, to help revolve them out of the criminal-justice system and help them live stable lives in the community.”

IMPLEMENTING NICOLA’S LAW — 10 YEARS LATER

In 2008, the Louisiana Legislature passed Nicola’s Law, which created a way that courts could require people with severe mental disorders to comply with treatment. All but four states have similar laws.

The Louisiana law was named for New Orleans Police Department officer Nicola Cotton, who was killed in January 2008 of that year by Bernel P. Johnson, a 44-year-old man suffering from untreated paranoid schizophrenia. Cotton’s death highlighted some of crucial gaps in the state’s mental-health system.

For instance, Johnson had been recently released from a state facility, Southeast Louisiana Hospital in Mandeville. After Cotton’s death, his family also reported that their efforts to have him confined and treated were repeatedly unsuccessful. Twenty-four days before Cotton was shot, Johnson had been involuntarily committed to Southeast by the Orleans Parish Coroner. He was released within a few weeks.

Nicola’s Law set up a framework for Louisiana to create court programs called assistive outpatient treatment, or AOT. But in subsequent years, the Louisiana state budget has been in such horrible shape that social and mental-health services have been slashed. There was no money for existing services, much less a new program.

A decade later, there still is no state money available to start the program. So the DDD and the city of New Orleans decided to do it on their own. Courts in Baton

Rouge and in Jefferson and St. Tammany Parishes are closely watching the process, because they are also interested in starting up their own AOT courts within the next year.

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, as the saying goes,” Judge Reese said. He has long seen the need for it. “It comes to the courthouse,” said Reese, describing the commitment hearings he oversees for people who are needlessly spiraling out of control. “Time and again, it’s folks who get off their medication, lose familial support and get kicked out of where they’re living,” he said.

This summer, Judge Reese prepared for the pilot by getting the concept sanctioned by the Louisiana Supreme Court and by his own colleagues at Civil District Court. In future years, the hope is to expand the program and its services to more people. A trailblazing AOT court in San Antonio, Texas, handles 4,500 cases a year.

In line with the intention of Nicola’s Law, AOT courts also dramatically reduce harmful behavior — suicide, property damage, physical threats. A report looking at a similar law in New York, called Kendra’s Law, found that the average decrease in harmful behaviors was 44 percent, cut nearly in half.

In the long run, 20 years of research shows that other AOT programs provide cost savings to the public purse, Judge Reese said. “If you can keep people stabilized and productive, they can stay housed and keep their jobs. So they won’t be homeless, they won’t be arrested or incarcerated, and they won’t be hospitalized at state or government expense. They will be people who live independently, contributing to society instead of being a drain on it.”