Research Assessment 6: MHMC Program

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Sources:

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2. Program, Mental Health Managed Counsel, and Alyse Ferguson. 2014 FY (n.d.): n. pag. Collin County TX. Web. 02 Dec. 2016. <http://www.collincountytx.gov/public_information/features/Documents/MHMCPresentationApril20_2015.pdf>.

Analysis:

Recently, I came across a Texas advocacy program called the Mental Health Managed Counsel program, otherwise known as the MHMC program. It is a program implemented by Collin County in order to help keep individuals with mental illnesses out of the criminal justice system and to ensure that they receive proper treatment and care. Interestingly enough, the program's coordinator is Ms. Alyse Ferguson, an individual I have an upcoming research interview with. As the program's coordinator, she has "not only seen thousands of inmates with mental health issues get treatment and legal representation, she's also tracked substantial cost savings in housing prisoners, psychological testing services, criminal investigations, and court costs." With that being said, the program is made to reduce the percent chance of re-arrest of those with mental illnesses.

While it may not seem so to a regular person, reducing the likeliness of re-arrest is significant in regards to those with mental illnesses. The revolving door effect many people experience is detrimental. Many times, individuals cycle through the system multiple times because there are not many measure to support them and keep them on their medication. In fact, I have learned from many police officers that they sometimes simply arrest an individual with mental illness to get them of the street and into a care facility where they can receive treatment they aren't able to afford otherwise. According to Collin County, "in-depth screenings of jail inmates show that about one in four inmates booked into the county jail each year have some type of mental illness. That translates into more than 4,000 people with mental health issues coming into the Collin County jail each year." As can be seen, 4,000 is a significantly high number of individuals with mental illness being put through the criminal justice system when all they need is proper treatment and support.

The MHMC program provides solutions to keep mentally ill defendants out of the criminal justice system. By doing so, the quality of life and representation of defendants with mental illnesses increases. One of the important measures that comes out of the program is a measure that enrolls prisoners in established mental health assistance programs. It provides the defendants with support so that they may be better prepared to managing their illness when released. A main problem the criminal justice system and psychiatric hospitals see is that when released back into society, individuals stop taking their medication after a few months. Subsequently, their illness is left untreated and influences them to commit actions that result with them being re-arrested. It's a vicious cycle. Additionally, the program provides legal representation in the form of an attorney and in some instances, a case worker. Usually, a case worker is provided to monitor the progress of individuals of those who have been clinically diagnosed with bipolar disorder, schizophrenia or major depression. Impressively though, the Mental Health Managed Counsel program attempts to combat stigma from the standpoint of law enforcement by providing training on identifying and dealing with defendants who have a mental illness.

Furthermore, not only does the program 'save lives' but it also 'saves dollars. It is common knowledge that it is extremely expensive to incarcerate an individual. In fact, it costs an average of $18,538 per year per person in the State of Texas. "During a Commissioners Court presentation this spring, Ferguson noted that county and grant funds to run the program in 2014 totaled $189,000, with the county's share coming to about a third of the total cost, and the rest covered by a grant from the Texas Indigent Defense Commission. The savings alone in days spent in jail (including psychiatric medications and other medical care) and competency testing – previously, all at county expense – came to more than $630,000." Clearly, the program saves money which allows funds to be allocated elsewhere. As mentioned earlier, the MHMC program is funded by Collin County and grant money from the Texas Indigent Defense Commission. The grant lasts for one year and is renewable annually for five years.

I also learned about the jobs and positions that are needed for the program to succeed and function. The bare minimum needed for the program to function is a program administrator/attorney and a case manager. " The program administrator is responsible for the day-to-day management of the MHMC Program," while the case manager assist the assigned attorney by providing timely and accurate advice about appropriate options regarding the defendant's care. However, it is important to note that there are many other duties each position is responsible for besides the ones mentioned here. With time, programs such as this one add administrative staff and other positions as well.

After reading about the Mental Health Managed Counsel program, I realized that I don't know a tremendous amount about government led initiatives meant to aid individuals with mental illnesses. I found it extremely educational and interesting learning about Collin County's program specifically. Since I

have an interview soon with the program coordinator, I will be able to learn even more details about the MHMC program and how it works. One thing I hope to learn that I didn't come across in my research, is the history behind this program. Where did it start? Who came up with the idea and why? These are all questions that will be answered next week.