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WHATCOM COUNTY LAUNCHES LEAD PROGRAM, OFFERING PEOPLE WITH BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ISSUES HELP OVER HANDCUFFS

Bellingham, Washington – The Whatcom County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office announced the launch of the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) program, a collaborative effort to offer people with behavioral health issues who have committed low-level law violations—including malicious mischief, disorderly conduct, and drug charges—a path out of the criminal justice system and into intensive case management. The LEAD program aims to increase community safety, address racial disparities in the criminal justice system, and improve the health and well-being of people with behavioral health issues.

People experiencing mental illness, drug dependencies, and extreme poverty sometimes commit low-level law violations driven by their unmet needs. Like many other communities, Whatcom County struggles to adequately respond to people with behavioral health issues. Law enforcement is overly relied on to respond in these situations although they have few tools for offering meaningful help. In these cases, arrest and incarceration is ineffective, costly, and harmful. The experience can be traumatizing and increases the potential for re-offense. It damages relationships between law enforcement and the community, while reinforcing racial disparities in our criminal justice system.

“I have been a prosecutor a long time and at some point, I began questioning whether our current laws and sentencing guidelines really help people stop committing crimes and protect the community,” said Whatcom County Prosecuting Attorney, Eric Richey. “I knew we needed to try something different.”

The Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion Program transforms how Whatcom County approaches public safety. Officers are able to create a path that leads people with behavioral health issues out of the criminal justice system and into intensive case management where they can remake their lives.

After joining the program, members get help with any immediate worries—a meal, place to sleep, or clean clothes. But they continue building a relationship with their intensive case manager over the months to deal with the roots of their issues. They can get help with needs that are difficult to manage alone, including stable housing, medication management, drug treatment, job opportunities, and family reconciliation.

Over 35 communities across the U.S. have adopted the LEAD program, including Santa Fe, Las Vegas, Denver County, and Philadelphia. Their programs have demonstrated the program’s success. LEAD members are 58% less likely to be arrested after joining the program. They are also much more likely to obtain employment, shelter, and income/benefits. LEAD is successful in reducing future law violations and the costs of criminal justice involvement while improving lives through support and services.

The Whatcom County Prosecutor's Office introduced LEAD to Whatcom County in 2019. Multiple organizations have since joined in partnership: Whatcom County Health Department, Whatcom County Sheriff's Office, Bellingham Police Department, all small city police departments in Whatcom County, and Sea Mar Community Health Centers.

LEAD is part of the Ground Level and Coordinated Engagement Response (GRACE) program and coordinates with other services, including the newly-expanded Crisis Stabilization Center. LEAD is funded through grants from the Department of Justice and the Washington State Health Care Authority.

For more information about the LEAD program, contact Eric Richey at (360) 410-6365.

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