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Middlesex County Restoration Center Commission holds inaugural meeting

A new commission charged with exploring the potential of creating greater opportunity for law enforcement and the courts to divert those with mental illness and/or substance use conditions away from the criminal justice system and towards appropriate treatment held its first meeting on Tuesday, April 3, 2018.

The 11-member Middlesex County Restoration Center Commission – chaired by Middlesex Sheriff Peter J. Koutoujian and Dr. Danna Mauch, the President and CEO of the Massachusetts Association for Mental Health – is tasked with piloting a program to create a restoration center in Middlesex County. The center would help support ongoing law enforcement diversionary efforts across New England's most populous county while also expanding the community capacity for behavioral health (mental health and substance use) treatment.

"At the Middlesex Jail & House of Correction, nearly 50 percent of those entering our custody report a history of mental illness, while almost three-quarters of all those being treated by our mental health staff have a co-occurring substance use disorder," said Sheriff Koutoujian. "Breaking the cycle of incarceration requires new, innovative approaches like the one this commission is tasked with exploring. Simply diverting individuals away from arrest is not enough – we have to divert them to care and treatment."

Legislation creating the commission was initially sponsored by the late State Senator Ken Donnelly (D-Arlington) prior to his passing last year and was subsequently championed by State Senator Cindy Friedman, Sen. Donnelly's successor and former chief of staff. Senator Friedman is the Senate chair of the Joint Committee on Mental Health, Substance Use and Recovery, and will serve on the 11-member Middlesex County Restoration Center Commission.

"The goal of the legislation is to create a restoration center that gives first responders a real option for diverting individuals with mental illness and substance use disorder from arrest and connecting them to appropriate treatment services," said Senator Friedman. "There is a critical need for these kinds of

services. I look forward to working with the commission to develop a 24-hour, insurance-blind delivery model that can provide seamless care to individuals suffering from a behavioral health crisis. Let's end the criminalization of mental illness and substance use disorder."

"Our work will consider, first and foremost, the characteristics and needs of the individuals we aspire to serve," said Co-Chair Mauch. "We will examine effective models of care to advance a solution that is the best fit for people with complex needs."

In addition to the co-chairs and Senator Friedman, the commission includes representatives of public health and public safety agencies, as well as the judiciary and behavioral health stakeholders.

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