III. How to Get Started

Bring the Right People to the Table

Stakeholders are individuals and representatives of organizations who have responsibility for, investment in, or will be impacted by the operation of a diversion program in their community. The specific stakeholders vary by jurisdiction, but typically they will include the following:

- Local judges and magistrates
- Law enforcement officials
- Jail administrators
- Jail mental health providers
- District attorneys and prosecutors
- Public defenders
- Pre-trial service providers
- Probation officers
- Community mental health and substance abuse treatment providers/administrators
- Health service providers
- Local and regional foundation program officers
• Housing and social service providers
• Elected officials (mayor, county commissioners, legislators, etc.)
• Consumers and consumer advocacy groups
• Family members
• Victim advocates
• Veterans Health Administration’s justice outreach coordinators
• Benefits specialists

Make sure to include representatives of other diversion programs that may be operating in your community. Your goal should be to enhance the services each program provides. If a Crisis Intervention Team or Mental Health Court is already operating, make sure to widen the net by focusing on a different target population or intercept point and to include members of these programs in the stakeholder group.

Even if you have representatives of all the agencies listed above, you may not have the people you need to make things happen. Consider what expertise needs to be represented on the committee, whose buy-in
can open doors to resources and services, and whose support is needed for the program to operate. In general, agencies should be represented by the chief executive or the executive’s designee.

Bring in a Co-Chair Who Can Represent Community Services

The ideal stakeholder group should be chaired by a criminal justice representative and a community-based services representative. In both instances, the chairs need to be strong leaders with some clout in the community and among the stakeholders. In other words, the chairs need to be change agents. Each chair needs good communication skills and an understanding of the jargon, protocols, and politics of local agencies.

Judges can be particularly effective at motivating agencies to see the shared responsibilities they have for improving outcomes for people with mental illness in the justice system. The chair from a community-based services agency needs to be an equally strong leader who understands the intricacies and politics of collaboration and service delivery.
Hold Stakeholder Meetings at the Court

It is important to hold full stakeholder meetings in a location that is perceived as neutral. Meetings at the offices of other agencies may aggravate existing turf issues. For that reason it is important to hold stakeholder meetings at the court.

Commit the Community to Problem-Solving Strategies

Problem-solving strategies in the courts are popular because judges can address particular problems and use their power to ensure positive outcomes and accountability. Such strategies also foster and rely on community engagement. The Center for Court Innovation (2005) has identified 13 strategies for promoting community engagement:

1. Involve community members in the planning process.
2. Assemble a community advisory board.
3. Hold community forums or open houses.
4. Gather a task force to target a specific ongoing issue.
5. Create opportunities for volunteers.
6. Develop community accountability boards.
7. Give presentations at public meetings and agencies.
8. Perform community surveys.
9. Train community members as mediators.
10. Provide the community with access to services.
11. Get the word out.
12. Let someone else open the door for you.
13. Invite the community to contact you.

Meet People Where They Are
If you are co-chairing the stakeholder group, you may be a great deal more enthusiastic about the plans for a diversion program than most other people, including fellow members of the stakeholder group. When bringing people or agencies into the group or just generating support, remember to meet people where they are—in their thinking, in their ability to collaborate, and at their office.
In their thinking

- Use the WIFM principle when pitching the diversion program. WIFM stands for “What’s in it for me?” Engaging stakeholders through the WIFM principle means selling people on the program based on how it will meet their needs.

- Do not expect full buy-in from any stakeholder until the program has been running long enough for the benefits to be palpable. Some people will be convinced of the value of jail diversion only when you are able to connect justice-involved people in your own community to treatment, housing, and supports.

In their ability to collaborate

- Many agencies are so short staffed and limited in their resources that collaboration is difficult.

- Community-based providers often have long waiting lists for services—approach the issue of queue jumping carefully.
The promise of new resources may be used to leverage in-kind resources.

At their office

- Do not invite an agency to serve on your stakeholder group without talking with executive staff beforehand. Cold invitations to join the group are more likely to be rejected and agencies may not understand the initiative or your expectations for their involvement.
- Meet with executive agency staff who can make agency-level decisions and personnel who can manage the implementation of those decisions.

Commit to Provide Quality Treatment and Services

Services are not one size fits all. People need comprehensive and appropriate services, but they are not the same services for everyone. Refer to page 24 for a discussion of community-based services.

In the end, programs should be planned based on the treatment services and supports available in your
Each partner needs to appreciate how the time and resources they dedicate to the project will benefit them. Listed below are ways to approach the WIFM principle when marketing a diversion program to stakeholders.

Law Enforcement Officials
- Reduces injuries to officers and people with mental illness
- Shortens time spent accompanying people with mental illness while they are evaluated for hospital admission and on repeat calls for service

Jail Administrators
- Reduces staff injury by providing training to improve officer interactions involving inmates with mental illness, including how to de-escalate crises
- Reduces the cost of providing expensive medication and treatment services within the jail
- Opens limited jail beds for more serious offenders

District Attorneys and Prosecutors
- Increases available options for disposing of cases
- Connects people to needed services while ensuring community supervision

Public Defenders
- Increases available options for disposing of cases
- Prevents rapid cycling of clients from the street to the criminal courts
Community-based Health Providers
- Reduces service interruption for divertees who were previously connected to services
- Increases individuals’ stability and shortens periods of mental health crisis and the need for inpatient treatment

Consumers and Consumer Advocacy Groups
- Avoids jail time
- Gains access to supports and services
- Focuses on recovery
- Reduces subsequent contact with the justice system

Family Members
- Provides loved ones access to treatment, services, and housing
- Reconnects family members and other social supports
- Promotes individuals’ recovery from mental illness and substance use disorders

Policymakers and Funders
- Enhances public safety
- Uses criminal justice resources more efficiently
- Reduces taxpayer expenditures
- Increases public confidence in the justice system
community. This means working with providers to inventory services and to determine what services are most appropriate given your target group.

Establish Practical Goals

Once you identify who needs to be part of your stakeholder group, you have to identify and reach agreement on desired outcomes or goals. Eventually, everyone in your group needs to be on the same page, but they are not likely to start out there. Dialogue in the first few meetings may be uncomfortable and time-consuming, but everyone needs a chance to be heard.

Consensus goals may include

- Connecting people with mental illness to services and supports that will help them to live independent lives in the community
- Reducing the frequency of contact with the criminal justice system
- Enhancing public safety through community supervision and leveraging available resources through the court
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- Using criminal justice resources more efficiently
- Improving the safety of law enforcement and corrections officers and the environment in which they work
- Reducing taxpayer expenditures on criminal justice efforts that produce bad outcomes
- Increasing public confidence in the justice system
- Stretching existing resources and gaining access to new sources
- Making community members more comfortable in public places

Network with Outside Experts

One of the best ways to learn about the strategies used by other communities and to generate greater buy-in from stakeholders is to visit other programs and to invite outside experts to present at a meeting. Even though you may know as much about diversion as an outside expert, their “outsider-ness” gives them more credibility. When you’re on a site visit, try to
arrange personal meetings with reluctant stakeholders and their colleagues in the community you are visiting to better understand their perspectives and find common ground for support.

Do not hesitate to reach out for Federal and State dollars for these visits or even to local foundations interested in these issues.