

MENTAL HEALTH MANAGEMENT ISSUES

Summary

The 2002-2003 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury conducted interviews with former employees of the Chanate Center at the Department of Mental Health. The Jury heard allegations of low employee morale and poor staff/management relations. These allegations were similar to the findings in the "Final Report of the 2001-2002 Grand Jury" in their investigations of the Norton Center (Psychiatric Emergency Services). Upon learning that the Board of Supervisors had granted a consulting contract to assess problems at the Department of Mental Health, the Jury chose not to interview management or staff during the period of the contract. The term of the present Jury expires in July 2003 and therefore, this investigation is not complete. As permitted by Penal Code section 924.4, this Jury wishes to make evidence gathered this year, available to the 2003-2004 Grand Jury.

Reason for Investigation

The Grand Jury received two complaints concerning the staff at the Chanate Center who felt demoralized and overworked. The complainants also reported poor communication between the staff and management. The complainants felt that the welfare of the mentally ill clients was being adversely affected. They also reported a high rate of staff turnover with the qualified staff being replaced by less trained workers. Two additional interviews were conducted before the Grand Jury requested and received the consultant's contract which would encompass all sections of the Mental Health Division including the Chanate Center. Follow-up interviews should be conducted by a future Grand Jury.

Background

The Mental Health Division includes 300 employees at thirteen locations in the county. This Jury recognizes that this Division may be challenging for staff since clients may be disoriented, out-of-control and, upon occasion, even dangerous. In addition, funding for Mental Health clients is reported to be lower than for many other health programs so management needs to closely monitor the welfare of its working staff.

Three previous Grand Jury Final Reports found the same problem of poor employee morale and the lack of effective two-way communication between management and staff.

Investigative Procedures

The Grand Jury:

1. Interviewed the following persons:
 - Two complainants
 - The parent of a client
 - An employee, Mental Health Division.

2. Reviewed the following documents:

- A memo from the Assistant director of Health Services to the Sonoma County Administrator
- The contract between the Board of Supervisors and the consultant hired to assess the Sonoma County Mental Health Division's organizational effectiveness.
- A monthly progress bulletin from the consultant
- Various newspaper articles
- The turnover rates of County personnel for the years 2000, 2001 and part of 2002.

Findings

F1. The Jury finds that the Board of Supervisors and the Department of Mental Health have taken the following three steps to address the problems reported by past Grand Juries:

- An independent consultant has been hired to make an organizational assessment of the Mental Health Department that will include employee interviews, a program to strengthen leadership skills, an action plan and a six-month follow-up assessment. This sixteen-month contract will be completed by December 31, 2003.
- At the Norton Psychiatric Emergency Facility, 3.2 additional full-time equivalent managerial positions and 6.2 full time equivalent staff positions have been created and are currently are being filled.
- Funding has been approved for security improvements at the Norton Center. The exterior construction such as doors, ramps, and keypad locks is now completed. However, because of the stringent requirements of the Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development, the current plan for interior security improvements is not acceptable. The Norton Psychiatric Emergency Facility, now 63 years old, must be brought up to newly mandated State codes before the proposed security construction is permitted. These requirements exceed the allocated budget.

F2. The high employee turnover rates alleged to exist at Chanate are not confirmed by data from the County Human Resources Department. Employee turnover rates for the Mental Health Department are about average as compared to other county departments.

F3. The four interviews completed suggest that the present employee morale at Chanate is as poor as that reported in the Final Reports of three previous Grand Juries.

Conclusions

The Mental Health Department has taken steps to improve working conditions for the staff. However, problems in staff and management relations appear not to have changed. Because of the nature of the population that the staff deals with, it is the consensus of the Jury that management should be more sensitive to the potential for heightened stress among its employees and more supportive of their concerns.

It is the hope of the Grand Jury that the consultant's efforts will be able to address and correct existing problems. The effectiveness of the consultation can be determined only by a future Grand Jury.

Recommendations

R1. The County Administrator should supply the Grand Jury with:

1. The monthly bulletin from the consultant
2. The action plan developed by the consultant
3. The consultant's final report

Required responses to Findings

None

Required Responses to Recommendations

Sonoma County Administrator: R1