

Distributed by Supri  
Item # 05-7-20-14

There is no one right way to create a jail diversion program; each program will be unique to the needs of the community.

## What You Can Do

While all diversion programs engage in some form of identification and linkage, *there is no definitive model for organizing a jail diversion program*. Jail diversion programs will be unique to the community and the services they provide will be tailored to the consumer. In fact, jail diversion programs in your community may differ even from those in the neighboring city or town because your jurisdictions will vary in the size and structure of the criminal justice system, the resources available to the mental health and substance abuse treatment systems, and the political and social climate in which you work. The model you choose will be based on these factors and it may seem at times that there is a dizzying array of options from which to choose.

As you begin planning, remember the old adage to “keep it simple.” Listed below are the five basic tasks involved in any jail diversion program and the six key features that will make them successful. Think of these as *what you are going to do* and *how to make it work*.

### Five Basic Tasks

Regardless of the type of diversion program you select, you are going to be required to do some or all of the following:

- **Know who you are looking for:** Determine your eligibility criteria.
- **Find them:** Screen and assess the people you believe are eligible.
- **Engage them:** Develop trusting relationships with consumers and plan for services they want and will accept.
- **Cut a deal:** Negotiate the terms and conditions of the jail diversion plan with the key players in your system, including law enforcement, defense attorneys, prosecutors, judges, mental health and substance abuse treatment providers, and consumers.

- **Make it stick:** Link consumers to the treatment and supports they need to recover from mental and substance use disorders and remain stably housed in the community.

### Six Factors for Success

Across all types of approaches, the following six key features have emerged as essential for creating an effective jail diversion program (Steadman, Morris, & Dennis, 1995). These elements are crucial in linking the criminal justice and community treatment systems:

1. **Interagency collaboration:** Services should be integrated at the community level, including involvement of social services, housing, mental health, health, local corrections (institutional and community), criminal justice, workforce development, Medicaid, and substance abuse agencies.
2. **Active involvement:** Stakeholders must hold regular meetings for service coordination and information sharing and establish formal agreements, such as written Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs).
3. **Boundary Spanner:** Programs require staff that bridge the mental health, criminal justice, and substance abuse systems and manage cross-system staff interactions.
4. **Leadership:** You need a strong leader to network and coordinate activities.
5. **Early identification:** People should be screened at the earliest point possible (ideally, in the first 24–48 hours of detention) for mental health treatment needs and to determine whether they meet the criteria for diversion.
6. **A specialized case management program:** An effective case management program is one of the most important components of successful diversion. Case managers should have adequate knowledge and experience with mental health and criminal justice systems.

Further discussion of these key components can be found in sections 4–6 of this publication.