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PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Berks County Named Stepping Up Innovator County for Efforts to Collect Accurate Data on People in Jails Who Have Mental Illnesses

Berks County was named today as one of a select group of eleven Stepping Up Innovator Counties in the United States for its expertise in collecting baseline data on the number of people in its jail who have mental illnesses.

The Stepping Up Initiative was launched in May 2015 by the National Association of Counties (NACo), the Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center and the American Psychiatric Association (APA) Foundation to mobilize local, state and national leaders to achieve a measurable reduction in the number of people in jail who have mental illness.

Since that time, more than 475 counties, including Berks, in 43 states, representing 45 percent of the U.S. population, have committed to the Stepping Up goals.

Berks County joined Stepping Up in December, 2015 and has taken significant steps towards reducing the number of people in its jail who have mental illness, with implementation of early steps dating back to 2000 when cross-systems mapping was completed, a Forensic Diversion Program developed and Forensic Case Management initiated. A Forensic Provider Coalition has since been formed based on the principals of the Data Driven Justice Initiative with utilization of the Open Lattice Data Information System.

Berks County was chosen as one of eleven Innovator Counties across the nation and the first in Pennsylvania who are using the Stepping Up suggested three-step approach to collect and analyze timely data on the prevalence of people in their jails who have serious mental illnesses (SMI). These steps include establishing a shared SMI definition for their Stepping Up efforts across criminal justice and behavioral health systems, ensuring everyone booked into jail is screened for mental illness, and regular reporting on this population.

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Commissioner, Chair Christian Leinbach said, “It’s time to stop talking about mental health in our county jails and to start making a real difference. That’s why we joined this NACo effort and I’m so proud that our team led by Dr. Michalik and Commissioner Kevin Barnhardt have done just that. We are making a difference for taxpayers and most importantly in the lives of the people dealing with serious mental health issues. It’s great to see that Berks County is a leader in the nation!”

Commissioner Kevin Barnhardt said, “as Chair of our County Prison Board and the CCAP Comprehensive Behavioral Health Task Force, it is extremely important to me that we engage in a two-way sharing of information and knowledge that all can learn and implement best practices that are custom to their unique criminal justice needs. All counties have limited financial resources and to use them more effectively and efficiently to assess and treat those residents with mental illness is a win for the community we serve. The criminal justice data for residents with mental illness are significantly higher not only in length of stay and recidivism but in the cost to our municipal police and EMS providers. Berks County recognizes this impact and is making data driven decisions to help lower these contacts with first responders and those with mental illness.”

As an Innovator County, Berks County will help other counties improve their data collection efforts by participation in training sessions, taking part in presentations, sharing information and its experiences through the Stepping Up website, and more.

Dr. Edward B. Michalik, MH/DD Program Administrator, Human Service lead for the project related that “this is a team approach involving the MH/DD Program, Service Access & Management, Inc., Berks County Adult Probation, Berks County Jail System, the District Attorney’s office and other members of the Criminal Justice Advisory Board. This is truly a recognition of a sustained commitment of the human services family and court related departments.”

Innovator Counties range in size and geographic location, from rural Pacific County, WA, which has a population of 22,000, to urban Miami-Dade County, FL, with a population of 2.6 million. To see a list of all Innovator Counties and find out more about Stepping Up, visit stepuptogether.org.

ABOUT THE STEPPING UP INITIATIVE

Stepping Up is a national initiative to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in jails. The initiative—a collaboration between The Council of State Governments Justice Center, the National Association of Counties and the American Psychiatric Association Foundation—asks communities to come together to develop an action plan that can be used to achieve measurable impact in local criminal justice systems of all sizes across the country. For more information visit <https://stepuptogether.org>.