

https://www.union-bulletin.com/news/courts_and_crime/new-program-in-walla-walla-county-offers-alternatives-to-jail-for-some-offenders/article_fcad6fd7-b5eb-5b31-9008-464c28965fe2.html

EXCLUSIVE

New program in Walla Walla County offers alternatives to jail for some offenders

By JEREMY BURNHAM of the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin
Jan 21, 2021



Regina Myers at Comprehensive Healthcare.

U-B photo by GREG LEHMAN



Regina Myers at Comprehensive Healthcare is the local manager for LEAD, the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion program.

U-B photo by GREG LEHMAN

A new partnership between law enforcement agencies and mental health providers in Walla Walla County means an alternative to incarceration will be available to some offenders.

The county is the latest in the state to have a local organization receive an Arrest and Jail Alternatives Grant through the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion program, also known as LEAD.

The program started on Jan. 1 and involves the Walla Walla and College Place police departments and the county Sheriff's Office and Prosecutor's Office.

Run locally by Comprehensive Healthcare and Blue Mountain Heart to Heart, the program offers mental health and addiction care — as well as other help such as meal and housing assistance — to people identified by law enforcement as eligible for participation in the program.

They will be referred to appropriate behavioral health and community support organizations and may have their cases deferred.

If the county prosecutor agrees to defer charges until a predetermined time and offenders engage in treatment during that period, their deferred charges may be dropped.

Regina Myers, Comprehensive Healthcare's project manager for LEAD said the effort will help participants get the help they need to get back on their feet.

“The primary objective is identifying people who are chronic, low-level offenders, getting them support and resources and getting them connected with some basic needs and being able to support them with ongoing care,” Myers said.

“Instead of arresting people who have some of these needs, we're offering them services in the community.”

The Arrest and Jail Alternatives Grant program was created in the 2019 Legislature. It provided funding for the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs to offer assistance to some people who would otherwise be arrested and jailed.

WASPC Executive Director Steve Strachan — a former police chief for Kent and Bremerton and a former King County sheriff — said his organization sees a lot of value in offering individuals with mental health or addiction problems an alternative to a jail cell.

“We have been supportive of alternatives to arrest and mental health field response for years and it’s one of the main areas of focus for our legislative recommendations this year,” Strachan said. “We are recommending to the Legislature that they continue to fund — and in fact increase funding — for these types of programs.”

Strachan said programs like LEAD can help reduce the number of interactions people have with law enforcement.

“This is exactly what people are talking about when we say, ‘Don’t make law enforcement the answer to every problem,’” Strachan said.

“And as nationally there have been demands for innovative ideas to reduce criminal justice involvement and negative interactions involving law-enforcement in the public, this is exactly the kind of innovative program that I think is sort of at the head of the curve.”

Walla Walla County’s LEAD program is the first in Eastern Washington. Once in the program, participants will be assigned a case manager to assist them with services and ensure they are complying satisfactorily.

Shay Hoffman of Blue Mountain Heart to Heart is one such case manager. He said the program aims to stop the cycle of repeat offenses.

“They may just need a break, or need a little restart in their lives,” Hoffman said. “Hopefully, we can help get them on the right track.”

“A lot of them are going around with undiagnosed mental health issues and they are coming into contact with police and police may not know what to do,” he added. “... We’re hoping to add more support and help them from becoming frequent flyers.”

Jeremy Burnham can be reached at jeremyburnham@wwub.com or 509-526-8321.

Jeremy Burnham

Reporter

Jeremy Burnham covers education and Columbia County for the Union-Bulletin. He is a recent graduate of Eastern Washington University, where he studied journalism, and is an Eastern Eagle fanatic.