

## **2018 Nomination for the Western Region CJAB Best Practices Award – Mercer County**

The Mercer County Criminal Justice Advisory Board (CJAB) was formed in 2006 under the leadership of then District Attorney Robert Kochems. The fledgling CJAB embraced and continued to build upon strong collaborations between law enforcement, public officials, community organizations, businesses, and schools established as part of their Weed and Seed and Communities that Care efforts. From the outset these organizations gathered alongside Mercer County's local victims' service providers to foster collaboration and build programming that would not only ensure public safety, but have a positive impact on the quality of life for all individuals in Mercer County.

Like many CJAB's across Pennsylvania, the Board is comprised of key stakeholders throughout the criminal justice, community, and human service systems. While their primary focus is changing the forefront of the criminal justice system, members also continue to look toward their foundations in building healthy families and strengthening communities. Together the CJAB and its partners are working toward one common goal identifying local strategies, services, and resources to reshape Mercer County.

To achieve this lofty goal, in the Spring of 2015, Mercer County's CJAB reached out to the Pennsylvania Center of Excellence on Mental Health and Justice to conduct a Cross-Systems Mapping to assist with priority planning to better serve individuals with mental illness, substance abuse, and co-occurring disorders that come in contact with the criminal justice system. They put together a strong team of individuals to guide the County through the mapping process. Upon completion, expanding upon diversionary programming, training opportunities for law enforcement, developing strategies for reentry, and data driven justice initiatives were among the priorities outlined through the mapping process.

Shortly thereafter Chairmanship passed to Juvenile Chief of Probation, Mark Benedetto. Recognizing the need to expand upon the CJAB's planning efforts, Mr. Benedetto strengthened his network of collaborations through the addition of a CJAB Coordinator, and building a strong team of individuals to guide Mercer County's Criminal Justice Advisory Board in their efforts to reach out into their local community to not only reshape criminal justice policy and practice, but to play greater role in local collaboration. The CJAB, its membership and partnering organizations are working with local municipalities to address abandoned and blighted properties, equipping law enforcement with much needed technologies and tactical equipment to improve community safety, and working with local universities to map out crime trends, gang activities, and areas with the highest substance abuse and behavioral health needs, etc.

Utilizing their Cross-Systems Mapping process as a strong foundation for collaboration, Mercer County CJAB sought funding to support them through a data driven strategic planning process. Members continue to partner with the Research & Evaluation Team from Penn State University-Shenango Campus to identify data sets to be utilized in analyzing and mapping out crime trends and service needs throughout Mercer County. In the interim, the CJAB is working on previously identified objective areas, including rapid rehousing for victims, human trafficking, and offering crisis intervention, PFAD, and lethality assessment training for law enforcement and first responders.

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Reentry planning, one of the more pressing concerns identified through the 2015 Cross Systems Mapping, has also become a major focus area for the CJAB. Moving forward, the CJAB will begin to look at housing, employment, and treatment needs of individuals returning to their local communities. In doing so, the CJAB and the County will tap into the expertise and resources available to them through the longstanding relationship they've cultivated with the Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole.

The County has also developed an Overdose Prevention Workgroup in response to the heroin and opioid epidemic gripping the State of Pennsylvania. The CJAB and its members have begun partnering with local organizations to reduce drug overdose in Mercer County through the use of evidence based programming and collaboration. The County utilized a series of Town Hall meetings to identify major objectives and areas of concern. Since that time, they've been able to expand the utilization and availability of Narcan, provide education to local pharmacies and physicians on the Prescription Drug Management Program as well as the Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) approach to the delivery of early intervention and treatment to people with substance use disorders and those at risk of developing these disorders. They also continue to encourage the utilization of prescription drop boxes, and guided the development of a Warm Hand-Off program. Their unique approach to reducing substance abuse draws upon their foundations of building healthy families and communities by offering resources and opening a line of communication with local families.

Rounding out their efforts in 2017, Mercer County CJAB sent a team of individuals to the Pennsylvania Stepping Up Summit. Shortly thereafter the Mercer County Commissioners passed a Stepping up Resolution, placing Mercer County among the ranks of dozens of Pennsylvania Counties who have resolved to reduce the number of individuals with mental illness who have been incarcerated or involved in the criminal justice system. Mercer County has resolved to utilize the treatment, housing, and other opportunities necessary to assist these individuals in being successful in their local communities.

The Mercer County CJAB has developed a strong connection with local partners and service providers, which has allowed the CJAB to grow and expand its reach back into the community reigniting their efforts to encompass prevention, intervention, treatment, and neighborhood revitalization. As a result, Staff respectfully recommends the Mercer County Criminal Justice Advisory Board for the 2018 CJAB Best Practices Award.