



Kansas Mental Health Summit Scheduled for April 13-14, 2022

By Judge Robert Wonnell

“What can I do?” That was the question I kept asking myself as I traversed an icy interstate road through the Badlands while returning from Deadwood, South Dakota, in the fall of 2019. I had just attended a regional summit as a member of the Kansas delegation that also included Chief Justice Marla Luckert, Hon. Patty Macke Dick, Hon. Timothy McCarthy and former Office of Judicial Administration Director of Education Denise Kilwein. The summit was part of the national initiative to improve the court and community’s response to mental illness issues in the justice system. This initiative is a collaboration of the National Center for State Courts, the Conference of State Court Administrators, the Conference of Chief Justices and the State Justice Institute.

I asked “what can I do” because before attending the summit, I had limited involvement in the world of behavioral health. But the more I learned at the summit, the more I knew this was a world where I wanted to fulfill my role as a public servant. I will exceed my character limit if I tell you everything I learned

at the summit and subsequent to my attendance, but I will offer a few comments and statistics for your review here:

Only 55.9% of Kansas children with a mental or behavioral health condition receive treatment or counseling.¹

In a 2021 ranking of states and the District of Columbia, Kansas ranked last with adults reporting unmet mental or behavioral health needs and 38th in adult access to care.²

There are approximately only 17 behavioral health professionals for every 10,000 residents in Kansas.³

1,388,836 people in Kansas (48% of the state’s population) reside in designated shortage areas and/or are served by a facility with shortages of behavioral health care professionals.⁴

Local jails and detention centers are the largest providers of mental health services – for both adults and children – in the country.⁵

Tens of thousands of defendants charged with misdemeanors or non-violent felonies who have a mental health or behavioral health problem are languishing in jail while awaiting a state hospital bed or community restoration services, often waiting longer than if sentenced for the original crime.⁶

When I heard the last claim at the summit, I thought, “Surely that is incorrect” ... until I learned that it wasn’t. And it’s happening right here in Kansas. Providing access to justice extends to every person – to every Kansan – including those living in the periphery or who may feel marginalized by society. Providing access to justice to individuals enhances their understanding that they have intrinsic value simply by being human. And so, we started...

Our delegation started small, and we had two initial goals: (1) Learn what we didn’t know and (2) Replicate the regional summit into a statewide summit for all judicial districts in Kansas. Regarding the first objective, we didn’t want to re-create the wheel. We knew that various committees and councils already were in place working on this issue and we needed to learn more about their efforts. We very quickly learned of amazing work originating from the Governor’s Behavioral Health Planning Services Council, the Special Committee on Kansas Mental Health Modernization and Reform, and the Criminal Justice Reform Commission, just to name a few. As we learned more about the status and progress of these committees, we became convinced it was necessary to bring everyone together to discuss mental health issues facing the Kansas justice system.

We also knew that real improvement – tangible and intentional change – would only be possible if this was a three-branch effort. So we met with Governor Laura Kelly and discussed the idea of a statewide summit. She was, and continues to be, in support of this initiative, and she appointed members from the executive branch to our planning committee. We spoke with Speaker of the House Ron Ryckman, who also agreed to pledge his support for the summit. Representative Brenda Landwehr and Senator Pat Pettey joined our planning committee and have made tremendous contributions. We have seen the amazing productivity that results when all three branches work together to address an issue.

The Kansas summit was scheduled to begin on September 30, 2021, in person and streaming online for anyone who could not attend in person. Our lineup included various task force and committee chairs, rural and metropolitan law enforcement, mental health providers, judges and multiple national experts who have served as catalysts for real-world change to improve how the justice system addresses behavioral health. Our attendees included representatives from judicial districts across the state, including judges,



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attorneys, mental health providers, government officials, law enforcement, co-responders and administrators, among others. We had support and representatives from the Royals and Chiefs scheduled to attend. Local filmmaker Michael Price was scheduled to present his film, “The Hidden Pandemic.” The stage was set.

However, due to COVID-19 restrictions on in-person gatherings in place at the time, we had to make the difficult decision to reschedule the summit to April 13 and 14, 2022. We knew that all the registrants had the morning of September 30 available, so we had a preview event. The virtual event was attended by over 200 people and included comments from Governor Kelly, Speaker Ryckman, Chief Justice Luckert and many others. And since then, the summit has only gained momentum. We have been able to reschedule almost all of our speakers, and we will be able to provide tangible resources and education to our attendees about improving the court and community’s response to the mental health issues we encounter. Attendees will learn about current Kansas and national initiatives, issues relating to competency to stand trial and enhancing all points of contact along the sequential intercept model. Governor Kelly, Speaker Ryckman and Chief Justice Luckert are scheduled to offer joint opening comments.

Since I returned from the regional summit in 2019, I have been inspired to find ways to improve mental health in my community. In addition to serving as the chair of the Summit Planning Committee, I have added Care and Treatment cases and the Assisted Outpatient Treatment docket to my division, building relationships with the professionals and residents in the behavioral health world in my judicial district. I serve on the Mental Health Advisory Board for Johnson County and as an ad-hoc member of the Special Committee on Kansas Mental Health and Modernization. I have participated in a ride-along with law enforcement, watching co-responders in action on the scene. I have met with staff at Osawatomie State Hospital and shaken hands and had wonderful conversations with residents there. I also began investigating the possibility of a comprehensive Behavioral Treatment Court in my district. I’m not telling you these things to receive a pat on the back, but to demonstrate that there is a place for you if you ask the question “What can I do?” and you start meeting the people

◀ already working to improve the system. And when you are there, in the moment, individuals in need are reminded that someone cares for them and that they have value as a person.

I want to invite you to attend the summit, either in-person (capacity is limited) or online. This summit has been designed to be a catalyst, not a conclusion. I can guarantee you will get your money’s worth (it’s free) and some continuing legal education hours. I hope that after attending the summit, you begin to ask yourself “What can I do?” and are moved to act the same way I was in 2019 (less the icy roads...). Register for the summit at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/2022KSMHS>.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss this with you more, one-on-one. My email is wonnellr@kscourts.org. Let’s have a conversation about where we go from here. ♦



Judge Robert Wonnell was appointed to the Johnson County District Court bench in 2015. He presides over general civil, AOT, and care and treatment cases. Previously, he heard family law cases. A graduate of the University of Kansas School of Law, Wonnell currently serves on the PIK

committee and the advisory board for Johnson County Mental Health.

References

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4. Id. (citing Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSA), HRSA Data Warehouse, 03/16/2018, and Census Bureau data (2017)).
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6. Id.



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