



Disability
Rights
Oregon

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
June 18, 2019

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Report: Portland Hospitals Sweeping Patients with Mental Illness into the Criminal Justice System

Portland, Oregon—A new investigative report released today by Disability Rights Oregon’s Mental Health Rights Project reveals that Portland-area hospitals rely on the police to arrest and remove patients with mental health conditions who are seeking care or have been recently discharged. Almost always, the individual ended up in jail. The report was issued by the state’s leading statewide disability rights organization.

“Our lives and our dignity have inherent value and we deserve to be treated like anyone else and to receive medical treatment when we need it,” said Jessica Sharp in a video recorded by Disability Rights Oregon. Jessica, who experiences schizophrenia, was arrested for trespass at Providence Milwaukie Hospital. She has since passed away from cancer.

The report was released against the backdrop of twin crises — a scarcity of both affordable housing and local mental health treatment options. In the last seven years, the number of people of with serious mental health issues who are reeled into Oregon’s criminal justice system more than doubled. Inadequate investment in community-based mental health treatment and affordable housing, poor discharge planning by hospitals, and few crisis response teams for people with mental health conditions continue to exacerbate these crises.

“All our lives, we’ve been taught that hospitals are safe places where you can go to get help. But for these 142 people, when they tried to get help, they ended up in jail,” said Sarah Radcliffe, managing attorney for Disability Rights Oregon’s Mental Health Rights Project. “Too often hospitals resort to having people arrested when they won’t leave. Many of these people had serious mental health needs and were looking for help. Their only crime was being in a place where they thought they could get help.”

People of Color, People Who Are Homeless More Likely to Be Arrested

The report, which examined calls from six Portland-area hospitals to the Portland Police Bureau in which the primary offense was trespass, covered a one-year period between 2017 and 2018. People who were homeless (72 percent) and people of color (35 percent) were more likely to be arrested for trespassing at a hospital, according to the report.

“When seeking care no person should be called ‘unwanted’, this is a matter of basic human dignity,” said Jake Cornett, Executive Director of Disability Rights Oregon. “This could happen to any Oregonian with mental health needs, but people from communities of color or people who don’t have homes are most at risk. When healthcare providers call the police on a person in crisis, it’s the first step on the path to criminalizing mental illness. This has a profoundly devastating and lasting impact on an individual’s life.”

Solutions

The report calls on hospitals to change their trespass policies and develop better plans for people when they leave. Over the long term, the report urges hospitals, health insurance companies, and CCOs to pool their dollars to invest in housing and community mental healthcare to help people stay healthy and stable. These pooled healthcare dollars should also be invested in a crisis response team, made up of a medic and mental health specialists, to prevent people in crisis from reaching a jail door.

The report, “The ‘Unwanted’s’: Looking for help, landing in jail,” is available on Disability Rights Oregon’s website: droregon.org.

Additional Resources

—“[One Year After ‘A Merry Go Round that Never Stops’](#)” (May 2018)

—[“A Merry Go Round that Never Stops: Mental Illness in the Multnomah County Detention Center”](#) (March 2017)

About Disability Rights Oregon

Disability Rights Oregon upholds the civil rights of people with disabilities to live, work, and engage in the community. The nonprofit works to transform systems, policies, and practices to give more people the opportunity to reach their full potential. For more than 40 years, the organization has served as Oregon’s Protection & Advocacy system.

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