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In-Jail Treatment of Inmates with Symptoms of Mental Illness: An Educational Intervention for Local Jail Correctional Officers

Abstract
There is a lack of knowledge and training by correctional officers in local jails regarding screening of inmates for symptoms of mental illness and criteria for appropriate referral of inmates for mental health care. The goals of this project were to: (a) educate correctional officers about symptoms of mental illness, therapeutic communication and verbal de-escalation techniques, and how to use a screening tool for mental health problems when an inmate is booked in a local jail; and (b) determine the number of inmates screened and referred for mental health care. The effectiveness of the educational intervention was assessed by pretest and posttest scores, screening and referral for mental illness, and an evaluation of the overall intervention. Participants were a convenience sample (N=15) of correctional officers at a local jail/detention center. There was a statistically significant change in the retention of knowledge among the participants after the presentation of the educational intervention (t (14) =2.256, p = .041). During a two month period after the educational intervention, there were 700 inmates booked into the detention center; 513 (73.3%) inmates were screened for symptoms of mental illness; and 21 (3%) inmates were referred for further mental health care. This project has contributed to the current body of knowledge by showing the positive impact of educating local jail correctional officers on symptoms of mental illness, therapeutic communication and de-escalation techniques, and screening of inmates for mental illness. This project has provided a foundation for closing the gap between the local jail system and in-jail treatment of mental illness.