Commission votes unanimously to support initiative to reduce number of mentally ill inmates in jails

The Wayne County Commission voted unanimously Oct. 15 to support a resolution introduced by Vice-Chair Alisha Bell to support the Stepping Up Initiative, which aims to reduce the number of people diagnosed with mental illnesses from being lodged in jails.

The Commission also unanimously voted to join Bell in co-sponsoring the resolution, and several commissioners urged county officials to implore the lobbying firms representing Michigan’s largest county to ask state and federal lawmakers to act on the issue.

The national initiative is being led by the National Association of Counties, the Council of State Governments Justice Center and the American Psychiatric Foundation.

According to research from the Stepping Up Initiative, an estimated 2 million people with serious mental illnesses are jailed each year, almost three-quarters of whom also have substance-use disorders. And, the prevalence of those with serious mental illnesses is three to six times greater than for the general population. Research shows that the costs for inmates with mental illnesses are two to three times greater than the rest of the jail population.
“Those in jail who are mentally ill need treatment that they might not be able to get while incarcerated,” Vice-Chair Bell said. “Getting these people the help they need is the humane thing to do. And, on top of that, it is very expensive for Wayne County to house them, especially since the county has had significant financial concerns.”

Wayne County has been under a consent agreement with the state of Michigan since Aug. 21, and one of the county’s biggest financial issues is paying overtime to sheriff’s deputies at its three jails because of chronic understaffing.

The Stepping Up Initiative calls for government agencies on several levels to collaborate on solutions. The American Psychiatric Foundation plans to hold a summit in spring 2016 in Washington, D.C.

More information about the Stepping Up Initiative is at StepUpTogether.org.