

Special court aims to keep mentally ill out of jail

By [Dee Riggs](#)

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World photo/Mike Bonnicksen

Steve Francis listens to Chelan County District Court Judge Alicia Nakata. At his right is his attorney, Jeffery Marchant. Behind him is Leslie Carlson mental health coordinator for the Chelan County Regional Justice Center.

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Other courts

Statewide: Full-time mental health courts in district courts King, Clark, Spokane, Clallam, Skagit and Thurston counties, according to Lois Smith, program manager for the Mental Health Court in King County District Court

North Central Washington: No specific time set up for mental health cases in Okanogan, Grant and Douglas counties, according to district court officials in those counties.

Service providers

While mentally ill people are in jail at the Chelan County Regional Justice Center, they receive services aimed at helping them through their jail stay and with their transition to living in the outside world.

The main therapists who work with inmates are:

Leslie Carlson, the jail's mental-health coordinator, who is paid from the Chelan County jail budget. Among her duties:

- Counseling inmates who are suicidal or who may be suicidal, and those who are distraught for any reason, and referring patients in need to therapists with Catholic Family and Child Service.
- Working with Columbia Valley Crisis Services therapists to determine whether inmates should be hospitalized in a facility that offers acute mental health care.
- Working with the jail's physician's assistant, who determines inmate medication needs.
- Working with the team that helps inmates make the move from jail to an outside living arrangement. On the transition team are the therapists with Catholic Family, employees with

the Women's Resource Center who help with housing, employees with the local alcohol and drug center, jail staff and the Chelan County probation office.

Heith Barkley and **Robin Lee**, therapists with Catholic Family & Child Service, who are paid through a contract with the state. Among their duties are:

- Assessing whether jail inmates need mental-health counseling, then providing that counseling.
- Working with the transition team to help inmates move on with life outside the jail
- Counseling released inmates for up to 90 days after they leave the jail.



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Before court, Leslie Carlson, mental health coordinator for the Chelan County Regional Justice Center, sits with defendant Steve Francis. "I think the courts are doing right," Francis says. "They want to make sure I don't hurt anybody or am a danger to myself, because somebody with this stuff could probably run out in front of a car and get hit or something."



World photo/Mike Bonnicksen

Judge Alicia Nakata presides over a hearing for Steve Francis in Chelan County District Court on Feb. 11.



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Steve Francis leaves Chelan County District Court after the 220 calendar on Feb. 11.



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Judge Alicia Nakata presides over a hearing for Steve Francis in Chelan County District Court on Feb. 11. Francis was attending the 220 calendar, a court time set up for people who have mental health problems.



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Chelan County Probation officer Debbie Yonaka addresses the court, during Francis' hearing.

WENATCHEE — Tuesday afternoons, usually about 2:20 p.m., the focus in Chelan County District Court is on mental health.

The accused who stand before the judge may have one or multiple mental-health problems. They could have such illnesses as bipolar disorders, schizophrenia, other paranoid disorders and personality disorders. All of them have been charged with a crime.

Jail, say the county's two District Court judges, is not the place for most of them. They need specialized help jail can't provide. In some cases, being in jail — the isolation, the slamming of metal doors, the cold environment — may be making their mental conditions worse.

That is why, in early November, the judges decided to set one time during the week — 2:20 p.m. Tuesdays — when inmates with mental illness, or possible mental illness, could come before one of them in Chelan County District Court. There, a judge can listen to the prisoner, mental health professionals, defense attorneys and prosecutors as they share plans for evaluating, monitoring and, in some cases, releasing the inmate to a safe environment.

"This way, we could potentially restore competency without holding them in jail for eight to 12 weeks," said Judge Alicia Nakata. "We can also be reducing costs to the jail and getting at the goal of maintaining crime-free behavior at the same time."

The main reason behind setting a mental-health-time — called the 220 calendar — is to give all professionals involved with a mental patient's case a set time that they know they should be in court, Nakata said. Previously, inmates with mental-health problems came before the court at scattered times, making it difficult to coordinate services.

Nakata estimates that on average two to six people a month who pass through District Court would qualify for a slot in the mental-health-time allotment. The men and women coming before the court have to be identified by jail staff or mental-health workers as having mental problems.

"This is a fairly small population, but it's a highly intensive part of the case load because people with mental illness have so many complexities and special needs that fully functioning people don't have," Nakata said.

"Jail is so the wrong place for a schizophrenic person who hears voices, has paranoia, has delusions," said Charlene Woodward, president of the local chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. "It is the wrong place for anyone who needs medication and needs a diagnosis."

Woodward applauds efforts to get qualified mentally ill people out of jail quickly.

"If you have behavior caused by a brain problem that looks like criminal behavior, NAMI's position is that it's a medical problem," she said. "It's not a moral or character flaw, and punishing them is absolutely the wrong thing to do. It doesn't rehabilitate and it only makes sick people get sicker."

While Nakata was the prime mover in establishing the 220 calendar, she credits the work of others in the community.

“This is the culmination of the prior work that we have all been trying to do, to somehow treat this population of offenders quickly and fast-track them out of jail,” said Debbie Yonaka. She is a probation counselor who works with inmates who have mental illness.

Yonaka said she expects to see better tracking of mentally ill inmates now because, in some cases, the mentally ill inmate will be called back to court weekly, instead of at longer intervals. This, she said, should make it less likely that they will get lost in the system, which has happened in the past.

Among those who have been working toward a mental-health time period are officials with Catholic Family & Child Service, Columbia Valley Community Health, jail staff, the Wenatchee Police Department, the Regional Support Network and the local chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

There is no similar time allotment in Chelan County Superior Court for mentally ill patients. Presiding Judge T.W. “Chip” Small said strict sentencing guidelines for felony crimes make that impossible. He added that state laws only allow mental-health court for courts like District Court, which deal strictly with misdemeanors and gross misdemeanors, which are less-severe crimes with shorter sentences.

Among crimes that commonly come through District Court are urinating in public, criminal trespassing, domestic assault and drinking alcohol in a park. Those are crimes often committed by people with mental illness, said Leslie Carlson, the jail’s mental health coordinator.

The District Court judges decide who is placed on the 220 calendar, but they accept input from jail staff, attorneys and family members.

Action during court depends on the severity of the illness. Inmates who appear unable to understand their rights may be put on a waiting list to be evaluated at Eastern State Hospital. Those with less severe illness may be released from jail if such services as housing and follow-up mental-health care can be lined up quickly.

But getting a mentally ill inmate out of jail, and into community services, does not mean that the inmate’s crime goes away. The inmate still must face the charges in court, and the inmate still must comply with a judge’s sentence. In many cases, that includes keeping mental-health appointments and not re-offending.

While the goal of the mental health calendar is to get as many mentally ill inmates into community help as possible, Nakata emphasized that a few must be kept in jail for public safety.

“Some people we are going to have to keep incarcerated and will have to take the traditional path,” she said.

Nancy Harmon, Chelan County’s second District Court judge, said she strongly approves of the 220 court calendar but hopes that one day a facility can be available in Wenatchee to house mentally ill offenders when they are first picked up for a minor crime.

Such a facility is in early planning stages and may be housed at the former Parkside Manor nursing home in Wenatchee.

“It would be nice to be able to divert them to a place where they can get the help they need right away,” she said.

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