



The front of the Alachua County Jail. The jail has enacted changes to make it better prepared to handle inmates with mental health issues, like through training and alterations to its suicide-watch cells, but some say much work still needs to be done. (Jessica Giles/WUFT News)

ALACHUA COUNTY JAIL MAKING STRIDES ON MENTAL HEALTH BUT STILL ENCOUNTERING STRUGGLES

By Jessica Giles

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Carrie spent her first three days at the Alachua County Jail in a velcro suit in one of the jail's suicide-watch cells, small padded rooms that are designed to allow guards to more closely watch those inside.

"You're in a cell by yourself," the 38-year-old said in a phone interview with WUFT News. "There's not really a bed. You sleep on a mat on the floor, and you don't have a sheet or blanket. It's humiliating."

Prior to Carrie's arrest for grand theft in 2006, her mother had mentioned to the judge that Carrie sometimes has suicidal thoughts. The comment landed Carrie in the watch cell.

Carrie, who asked that her last name not be used because of the sensitive nature of this story, has struggled with bipolar disorder since 2005. Through years of trial and error, she found prescriptions that helped her cope and, conversely, ones that made things worse.

After the 2006 grand theft case, she ended up back in the Alachua County Jail twice more: in 2009 for grand theft again, and in 2013 for violating her probation related to the 2009 incident.

In her time at the jail, she said she found that some of the facility's mental health practices were doing mostly harm, to herself and to others.

"It's really sad to see, especially with the people that have major illnesses that are basically just like walking zombies," Carrie said. "It's very similar to a state mental institution, which is just basically keeping people quiet." ^

Carrie's two more recent times at the Alachua County Jail come as it's seeing an increase in inmates with mental illness.

From 2009 to 2015, the number jumped up 35 percent, according to a May 2016 report from Corizon Health, the jail's private health care provider. The report notes that 275 inmates out of all 823 (as of April 7, 2016) had mental health issues — or about a third of the total inmate population.

And while the jail has made modifications to better accommodate, some say more needs to be done — in terms of funding, training and medication offerings.

Suicide at the jail

In extreme cases, the mental health issues can lead to suicide, which often prompts discussions on the placement and treatment of such inmates.

"He should not have been there" in the jail's general inmate population, Windy Nochomson told the Gainesville Sun in 2014 after her son Austin Dionne committed suicide there. "It was negligent and stupid of them."

In 2013, 6 percent of jails countrywide reported more than one inmate death, including by suicide, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. The Alachua County Jail was one of them.

The jail found itself in this category again in 2015.

The bureau does not separate suicide deaths specifically, but Art Forgey, a spokesman for the Alachua County Sheriff's Office, which oversees the jail, recalled no suicides in 2016 and one so far this year.

Incarceration problems related to mental health stem mainly from the larger, statewide issue of funding and not necessarily from the jail's actions or the lack there of, said Stacy Scott, the public defender for the Eighth Judicial Circuit, which covers Alachua and some surrounding counties.

"There is not adequate funding in our state and in our community to adequately serve people that have a

mental illness," she said. "But they're not to the point where they're incompetent to proceed."

Forgey said that, to his knowledge, the jail has never received a complaint about mental health care.

A jail isn't inherently built to care for the mentally ill, he said, but Alachua County's has put itself in a position to, including through renovations to the suicide-watch cells and through crisis-intervention training for employees.

The renovations, which began after the attempted suicide of Jermaine Green at the jail in May 2013, included changing the suicide-watch cells' windows and how their bunks are fastened to the wall — changes meant to prevent those room features from being used for suicide.

As for crisis-intervention training, about 80 percent of all jail employees have received it, Forgey said, and Sheriff Sadie Darnell hopes to eventually bring that to 100 percent.

"Our focus really has shifted to taking care of a lot of the mentally ill," Forgey said.

A switch in drugs

One of the problems Carrie said she experienced was Corizon not offering Topamax, a drug for migraines and epilepsy but that Carrie's doctor prescribed as a mood stabilizer.

She was given the option to see a psychiatrist or psychologist, and she chose the latter. She said she didn't choose a psychiatrist, who can prescribe, because she knew the side effects of what the drug she or he might recommend.

"For me and what I know and the drugs that they offer in there, those are not good for me, and I get into a really bad depression," she said.

In the meantime, Carrie relied on her mother, Susan Gornto, to talk her through the difficult moments.

"She would get very frantic, very panicked," Gornto said. "She was calling me, which I was taking the calls, and they're very expensive because I wanted to calm her down."

Gainesville city Commissioner Harvey Budd said at a City Commission meeting in November that he is aware of the problems Carrie experienced at the jail. His comments came after a citizen brought up his own negative experience with medication at the jail.

Budd said he witnessed mistreatment of inmates with mental health problems himself when he went to

visit a friend in the jail. He said his friend has bipolar disorder, and upon entering the jail, the friend was not given the prescription he was taking previously.

“It’s a little hard when you change meds when you’re bipolar,” the commissioner said later in a phone interview.

Budd said his friend began having outbursts because he was off his typical medication. This instability landed him in a situation much like Carrie’s: placed in a padded room and on suicide watch, Budd said.

“We treat dogs in the pound better than we treat prisoners in the jail,” he said by phone.

Budd said the jail needs mental health reform. Specifically, he’d like to see consistent drug prescription before and during incarceration and better employee training.

‘A cost issue’

Scott, the public defender, said she realizes the jail does the best it can with its available resources and that it can’t always match prescriptions exactly because of funding.

“A lot of times, [the inmates] may be on a brand-name, cutting-edge medicine when they’re admitted into the jail,” she said. “The jail has a contract with a medical provider, and there’s a cost issue. So a lot of times they try to substitute the brand-name drugs for a generic version due to cost.”

This could lead to problems because not all inmates are able to transition seamlessly from one medication to another, Scott said.

“It’s well-known that different people respond differently to a specific type of drug, like an anti-depressant,” she said. “And a lot of times, people have to go through multiple different ones to find the one that works for them.”

Also, sheriff’s office spokesman Forgey said prescribing drugs from inside the jail guarantees that staff is aware of exactly what the inmates are taking.

In general, the jail excels when it comes to identifying inmates who would benefit from being placed in a mental institution instead, Scott said. Those inmates, she added, are often expedited to such a facility.

Carrie said she herself would have rather ended up in such an institution instead of the jail, but she didn’t meet the requirements, including being evaluated by a doctor and then being declared incompetent to stand trial.

Nevertheless, she has heard of bad experiences at institutions, too.

“I have friends who have endured stays at the state hospital and been traumatized by electric shock and being medicated so much they lost time. [Institutions and jails] are both ineffective for different reasons,” Carrie wrote later in a text message.

“The judicial system in Florida is grossly negligent when it comes to understanding, identifying and serving people living with mental illness.”

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