

BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS OF FULTON COUNTY

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May 11, 2016

U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
Bureau of Justice Assistance

Re: Letter of Support for Superior Court of Fulton County
Fulton County Justice and Mental Health Task Force-Stepping Up Initiative
BJA-2016-9205

To Whom It May Concern:

Fulton County has a need to improve our efforts in **reducing the number of individuals with mental and co-occurring substance abuse disorders in our criminal justice system**. We take pride in our responsibility to protect and enhance the health, welfare and safety of our community and believe that by using the strategies set forth by the *Stepping Up Initiative*, we will increase public safety and improve the lives of those who struggle with mental illness.

We understand that our current criminal justice system has a wide net that brings the mentally ill in, but once in, there is little opportunity for exit. This coupled with often insufficient and overwhelmed resources to provide critical supports like substance abuse treatment, mental health care and adequate housing, the numbers and the costs associated will continue to rise. These combined factors have contributed to increasingly poor outcomes and high recidivism rates for an already marginalized population.

We must call attention to the fact that we are all connected and that the policies and procedures of one individual agency can have dramatic impact on the rest of the justice and mental health partners. While many individual agencies in Fulton County have been taking important steps in the right direction to make meaningful change, this fragmented approach will not lead to the holistic reform we all seek. The problems are complicated, multifactorial and the solutions can seem insurmountable when working in isolation. Our agencies also lack the uniform data necessary to objectively evaluate the system as a whole, leading to the inability to truly make data informed, systems-wide change.

Historically, Fulton County is known for setting the precedent that surrounding counties and states look to for guidance. **Our challenge now is to set that precedent and work collaboratively** to make meaningful reform to reduce the prevalence of people with mental illness in the justice system.

We believe Fulton County stands poised to take this important collective step forward using the nationally supported *Stepping Up Initiative* as our guide. *Stepping Up* calls us to:

- Convene a diverse team of leaders from criminal justice and mental health committed to driving down the number of the mentally ill in jail
- Collect and review prevalence data
- Examine treatment and service capacity
- Develop an action plan
- Implement research-based approaches
- Create a process to track progress

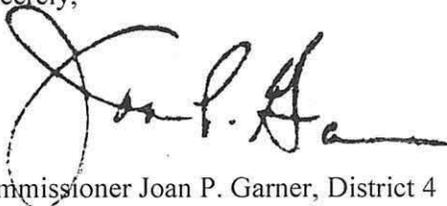
Our community will achieve this call to action by **convening the Fulton County Justice and Mental Health Task Force**, where agency leaders, national experts and data research teams will have the opportunity to **create an action plan**, targeting reform in areas where we will see the greatest impact. The action plan will be created through a **comprehensive analysis and inventory of services** for people with mental illnesses from the moment of first contact to final disposition. Data collection is critical to the success of the initiative and will be applied to a **detailed systems map** at every point a person with mental illness is intercepted. Finally, with support from local and national experts skilled at **translating research to actual practice**, Fulton County will develop a broad, accurate, data and research-based action plan to move forward.

Our goal is that through these coordinated efforts, we will safely reduce the numbers of individuals entering the system, increase therapeutic opportunities to improve their quality of life while in our custody, and create adequate avenues for planned, well-reasoned release back into the community of Fulton County.

Our agency fully supports the **Superior Court of Fulton County serving as the lead agency** in these efforts and we are committed to fully participate to achieve our mutually desired goals. The Superior Court has been laying down the groundwork with important initiatives surrounding mental health for a decade, starting with the creation of Behavioral Health Treatment Court in 2006. Most recently in 2015, the Superior Court coordinated a Mental Health Symposium, which brought in national leaders like Miami's 11th Judicial Circuit, Judge Steven Leifman who inspired over 250 metro Atlanta professionals. Through the leadership of Superior Court's Chief Judge Gail S. Tusan, we wholeheartedly believe the Fulton County Justice and Mental Health Task Force will achieve its mission.

On behalf of the individuals in Fulton County who struggle with mental illness, we thank you for considering this important request to fully participate in this initiative. Our agency looks forward to the opportunity to collaborate with our partners and do the hard work necessary to improve outcomes for the mentally ill the Fulton County community. Please contact me if I can provide any additional endorsement.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joan P. Garner". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "G".

Commissioner Joan P. Garner, District 4
Fulton County Board of Commissioners