

COURTS

How the Center for Health and Justice Transformation changed RI's criminal justice system



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PROVIDENCE — In 2005, Drs. Scott Allen and Josiah “Jody” Rich co-founded a center aimed at advancing health equity and human rights through advocacy and education for people involved in the criminal justice system.

Known as the Center for Prisoner Health and Human Rights, the initiative joined doctors with researchers, lawyers, activists and the Brown University Warren Alpert Medical School community to raise awareness and bring change to the criminal justice and public health arenas.

Rich and Allen strove to improve outcomes for people grappling with poverty, substance use, structural racism, incarceration, and other vulnerable groups.

The center’s origins and continuing mission is to draw attention to the “massive problem” of mass incarceration, fueled by the war on drugs and the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, and the damage it does to individuals and society, says Rich, an associate professor of emergency medicine and epidemiology at Warren Alpert Medical School.

“We asked the question, ‘why do we lock them up? Why don’t we treat them?’ The rest of the world doesn’t lock people up for addiction,” says Rich.

“The message the criminal justice system sends you is ‘you’re less than,’” Rich said.

Now called the Center for Health and Justice Transformation at Lifespan, its leaders can be found advocating at the State House, working with the state judiciary, and at the state Department of Corrections, all in pursuit of best practices at the intersection of health and justice. They spread their word in opinion pieces that run locally and in national publications.

“There’s a lot to be done,” Rich says.

Funded through donations and grants, the nonprofit Center for Health and Justice Transformation will hold its first fundraiser – a More Justice! More Health! Gala – at Rhode Island School of Design Thursday, June 15, at 5:30 p.m. Tickets are \$40.

The Center's accomplishments, by the numbers:

Below are a few of the center’s accomplishments and an overview of the people it serves, by the numbers.

\$2.5 million: The approximate amount in court fees and fines that have been waived for indigent Rhode Islanders by the state judiciary. In response to the center's advocacy, Superior Court recently developed a new system for eligible people to have their court fees remitted by filling out paperwork through the clerk's office rather than having to appear before a judge. The center's last community court debt review will take place June 22 at the Community Care Alliance in Woonsocket.

200: The number of people, including state leaders, federal prosecutors and health professionals who have been trained through the center's Reentry Simulation Program to better understand and meet the needs of Rhode Islanders newly released from prison. The next session will be with employers in the state.

1: The number of clinics the center has co-founded to support formerly incarcerated people with chronic medical conditions. The Lifespan Transitions Clinic coordinates health care and works to secure resources, including housing, food, transportation and clothing, for people newly released. The clinic has increased the time patients remain in care and led to reduced emergency room visits. It established an innovative medical-legal partnership with the Rhode Island Public Defender's office to bring a health-care perspective to the courts.

71%: The percentage of Lifespan Transitions Clinic patients who are unemployed; 85% report that at the end of the month, they do not have enough money to pay for basic needs, according to the center.

71%: The number of Transitions Clinic patients diagnosed with a mental health disorder. Only 21% of those people have a mental health provider.

69%: The percentage of patients who report a substance-use history, while 40% are homeless or unstably housed upon intake.

7: The number of organizations partnering with the center to create a coordinated reentry system in Rhode Island that starts before individuals leave the Adult Correctional Institutions and continues to assist them after release. The center's partners in the Rhode Island Reentry Alliance are the Lifespan Transitions Clinic, Amos House, the Reentry Campus Program, Nonviolence Institute, Open Doors, Building Futures, and ManUp, founded in 2011 to provide workforce development and higher education opportunities, resources and support services to formerly incarcerated men of color.