

Behavioral Health and the Justice System

Richmond's Continuum of Crisis Response, Forensic Services, and Recovery

Executive Summary

Behavioral health and the criminal justice system intersect every day in communities across Virginia. Individuals living with serious mental illness are disproportionately represented in jails and court systems, often because untreated or undertreated behavioral health conditions contribute to behavioral health crises, arrests, hospitalization, and repeated involvement with the justice system.

Richmond Behavioral Health Authority (RBHA) is working to interrupt that cycle across the entire continuum of care.

Through an expanding Crisis Care Services system - including 988, Community Services Board Emergency Services, mobile crisis response, Crisis Receiving Centers, and Crisis Stabilization Units - RBHA and its regional partners are working to ensure that individuals experiencing behavioral health crises receive timely clinical intervention before justice involvement becomes necessary whenever possible. The guiding principle is simple: **there is no wrong door for accessing behavioral health crisis care.**

When justice involvement does occur, RBHA partners with courts, regional jails, hospitals, law enforcement, attorneys, and community providers to deliver competency restoration, jail-based behavioral health services, diversion initiatives, discharge planning, and community reentry support. Together, these services help individuals receive appropriate treatment, participate meaningfully in legal proceedings, and reconnect with ongoing behavioral health care.

This report highlights how Richmond's coordinated behavioral health continuum - from crisis response through forensic services and community reentry - is helping reduce unnecessary incarceration, improve recovery outcomes, and strengthen public safety through collaboration.

Why This Matters

When behavioral health conditions go untreated, the consequences often extend beyond an individual's health. Mental illness, substance use disorders, cognitive impairments, trauma, and developmental disabilities can contribute to repeated behavioral health crises, involvement with law enforcement, emergency hospitalization, and incarceration.

For many individuals, incarceration is not the beginning of the story - it is one point within a much longer cycle.

Breaking that cycle requires more than treatment alone. It requires coordinated partnerships among behavioral health providers, courts, correctional facilities, hospitals, community organizations, and local government.

RBHA serves as a critical partner within that system.

Preventing Justice Involvement: A Crisis Care System Designed to Respond First

The most effective way to reduce justice involvement among individuals experiencing behavioral health crises is to provide timely access to behavioral health care before law enforcement or incarceration become necessary.

Over the past several years, Virginia has made significant investments in developing a comprehensive Crisis Care Services system designed to ensure that behavioral health crises receive behavioral health responses whenever appropriate. Through this evolving continuum of services, individuals and families have multiple pathways to access assessment, stabilization, mobile crisis response, and ongoing treatment. The guiding principle is simple:

There is no wrong door for accessing behavioral health crisis care.

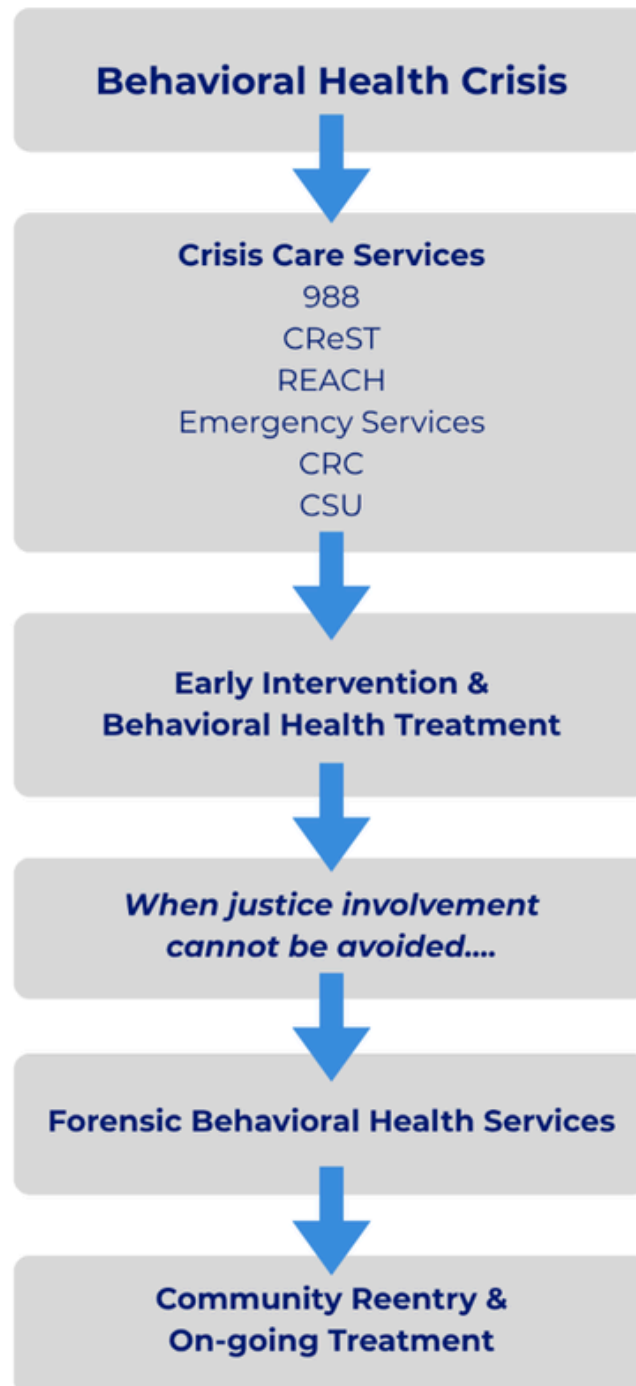
Region 4's Crisis Care Services continuum includes:

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
- Community Services Board Emergency Services
- Community Response and Stabilization Team (CReST)
- REACH crisis services for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities
- Crisis Receiving Centers (CRC)
- Crisis Stabilization Units (CSU)

Together, these programs provide a range of services - from telephone support and mobile crisis response to short-term stabilization and voluntary inpatient treatment - helping individuals receive the right level of care at the right time.

While not every behavioral health crisis can be diverted from the justice system, these services are designed to reduce unnecessary law enforcement involvement, emergency department utilization, hospitalization, and incarceration by providing timely clinical intervention and connecting individuals with ongoing community-based treatment.

For individuals whose circumstances do result in justice involvement, RBHA's forensic behavioral health services provide the next layer of coordinated care, helping individuals move from crisis toward treatment, recovery, and successful community reentry.



Richmond's Forensic Services Continuum

The forensic behavioral health continuum is designed to ensure individuals receive clinically appropriate services throughout their involvement with the justice system.

Rather than functioning as isolated programs, these services work together to move individuals from crisis toward stability, recovery, and successful community reintegration.

The continuum includes:

- Competency evaluations
- Community-based competency restoration
- Jail-based competency restoration
- Jail behavioral health services
- Diversion initiatives
- Discharge planning
- Community reentry coordination
- Ongoing behavioral health treatment and supports

The goal is not simply to complete legal processes - it is to connect individuals with treatment and supports that improve outcomes while promoting community safety.

RBHA's Role

Competency Restoration

Competency restoration is often misunderstood.

Its purpose is not to determine guilt or innocence. Rather, competency restoration helps individuals who have been found incompetent to stand trial develop the understanding and skills necessary to participate meaningfully in court proceedings.

Restoration services are individualized, recognizing that each person enters the legal system with unique strengths, challenges, life experiences, and clinical needs.

Jail-Based Behavioral Health Services

RBHA's Region 4 Jail Team provides behavioral health services within correctional settings while coordinating closely with courts and hospitals.

During FY26, the team managed more than 230 referrals across Richmond City Jail and Riverside Regional Jail, providing competency restoration, discharge planning, case monitoring, and recommendations for inpatient services when appropriate.

These services help maintain continuity of care while preparing individuals for successful transition back into the community whenever possible.

Diversion and Community Reentry

Successful reentry begins well before an individual leaves incarceration.

RBHA's diversion and reentry services work to connect individuals with housing, treatment, benefits, family supports, and community behavioral health services that reduce the likelihood of future crises or justice involvement.

The objective is straightforward: help individuals return to the community with a plan, supports, and continued access to behavioral health care.

Meeting People Where They Are

Every individual entering the forensic behavioral health system brings a unique history, learning style, culture, and set of clinical needs.

Because of that, competency restoration is never a standardized process.

One individual learned legal concepts through familiar farm analogies drawn from years of repairing tractors. Another benefited from visual learning strategies after clinicians identified previously unrecognized hearing and auditory processing challenges. Others required culturally responsive approaches, trauma-informed interventions, or time to build trust before meaningful progress could begin.

These examples illustrate a defining principle of RBHA's forensic services:

Meeting each individual where they are.

Through individualized therapeutic interventions, education, and relationship-building, clinicians help individuals develop the knowledge, confidence, and skills necessary to participate in legal proceedings while supporting their broader behavioral health recovery.

Meeting People Where They Are

Beyond the Courtroom: A Therapeutic Approach to Restoration

*Attached at the end of this report.

FY26 Snapshot

Competency Restoration

During FY26, RBHA's community-based restoration program documented 38 case outcomes, including:

- 14 individuals restored to competency (36.8%)
- 9 cases resulting in dismissed or nolle prosequi charges (23.7%)
- Appropriate transfers to jail-based or inpatient restoration when clinically indicated
- Other outcomes reflecting changes in legal status or loss of contact

Region 4 Jail Team

- More than 230 referrals managed; 99 of these were for jail-based restoration
- 32 individuals restored to competency (32.7%)
- 25 individuals with restoration orders diverted from jail (25.5%)
- Appropriate transfers to inpatient restoration when clinically indicated
- Other outcomes, such as ongoing restoration after expiration of the 6-month restoration order

Reentry Services – Jail Team

- 21 individuals were opened to reentry services
- Individuals were connected with housing programs, family supports, hospitals, and other community resources based on their individual needs.

Opportunities Moving Forward

Richmond's forensic behavioral health system continues to demonstrate strong collaboration across behavioral health, courts, correctional facilities, hospitals, and community organizations. At the same time, opportunities remain to strengthen outcomes.

Future opportunities include:

- **Strengthen Early Intervention**
 - Expand diversion opportunities
 - Increase access to behavioral health services before justice involvement occurs
- **Improve Continuity of Care**
 - Strengthening continuity of psychiatric treatment and medication management during incarceration and reentry
 - Increasing access to stable housing and community supports following release

• Deepen Community Partnerships

- Continuing partnerships with courts, public defenders, prosecutors, and correctional leadership to improve timely restoration processes
- Supporting early access to behavioral health services to reduce the likelihood of repeated crises, hospitalization, and justice involvement

These opportunities closely align with the statewide discussions being led by the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services regarding competency restoration, jail treatment, judicial collaboration, and reducing repeat forensic admissions.

Closing

Behavioral health and criminal justice systems share a common goal: improving safety while supporting individuals in achieving healthier, more stable lives.

For many people living with serious mental illness, recovery depends on more than clinical treatment alone. It requires coordinated partnerships that recognize behavioral health needs, promote access to appropriate services, and create opportunities for successful reintegration into the community.

Through competency restoration, diversion initiatives, jail-based behavioral health services, discharge planning, and reentry coordination, RBHA is committed to helping individuals move beyond crisis, interrupt cycles of repeated incarceration and hospitalization, and build pathways toward long-term recovery.

Meeting People Where They Are

Beyond the Courtroom: A Therapeutic Approach to Restoration

Competency restoration is often misunderstood as simply teaching someone about the court system. In reality, it is a highly individualized therapeutic process that helps each person develop the understanding, confidence, and skills needed to meaningfully participate in legal proceedings. Through individualized education, clinical interventions, and relationship-building, restoration also supports broader behavioral health recovery and stability.

Every individual enters the restoration process with different strengths, challenges, life experiences, cultural backgrounds, and behavioral health needs. There is no single approach that works for everyone.

Life Experience

Using familiar experiences to teach new concepts.

For one individual, understanding legal concepts began with familiar farm equipment. A clinician used the client's years of repairing tractors to explain decision-making and problem-solving, helping connect everyday experiences to the legal choices he faced.

Individualized Learning

Adapting education to each person's cognitive and communication needs.

Another individual struggled to learn because of previously unidentified hearing and auditory processing challenges. By incorporating visual teaching tools, repetition, and modified learning strategies, clinicians were able to improve comprehension and communication.

Trust & Therapeutic Relationship

Building rapport through trauma-informed and culturally responsive care.

Others required trauma-informed approaches that first focused on building trust before meaningful learning could begin. Some benefited from culturally responsive interventions that honored their personal experiences and values. Others learned to recognize and manage symptoms of serious mental illness that had previously prevented them from effectively participating in legal proceedings.

These examples reflect a common principle that guides every aspect of forensic behavioral health care at RBHA:

Effective restoration begins by meeting people where they are - not where we expect them to be.

Through individualized education, therapeutic interventions, relationship-building, and clinical expertise, RBHA's forensic clinicians help individuals move beyond legal processes toward greater understanding, stability, and recovery.