



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Board Approves Funding for Mental Health Court Study**

**GRAND RAPIDS** – Mental health issues are perhaps one of the largest contributing factors to recidivism. Providing much-needed treatment to those suffering from mental health issues could help offenders recover and stay out of the justice system, while alleviating the strain on the courts and jails. The Board of Commissioners voted this morning to accept a \$33,000 Mental Health Court Planning Grant from the State Court Administrative Office (SCAO) be appropriated to the 2017 Special Projects Fund budget.

The State Legislature created the mental health court statute in 2013, enabling trial courts in Michigan to develop and operate mental health courts. A mental health court is a specialized court docket for certain defendants with mental illness that substitutes a problem-solving model for traditional criminal court processing. The SCAO makes funds available annually for planning and implementation of mental health courts.

The 17<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court, in collaboration with Network180, received the funding to evaluate the need for a mental health court within Kent County and how these services would best be delivered. As required by the grant, staff representing the 17<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court, local district court, Network180, County Prosecutor, Sheriff's Office, Public Defender's Office, mental health services providers and County Administration will participate in the project planning committee. "We simply cannot operate in silos when it comes to the mental health system and the justice system," said Judge Donald A. Johnston, 17<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court Chief Judge. "By working together, we hope to enhance public safety and make a difference in the lives of individuals who are trapped in an endless cycle of illness and jail."

Grant funds will be primarily used to contract with a consultant to serve as the Mental Health Court Planning Coordinator. The coordinator will work with the project planning committee to determine whether implementation of a mental health court in Kent County would reduce recidivism, enhance public safety, and improve outcomes for mentally ill citizens. "When we treat mental health issues successfully, we will save money that would be spent on court costs and incarceration," said Jim Saalfeld, Chair of the Board of Commissioners. "Our Board is hopeful that this study will result in development of a program into the future."

James Hughes, former Regional Administrator for the Michigan Supreme Court, will coordinate the effort on a contractual basis under the direction of the 17<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court Administrator Andrew Thalhammer. "Kent County has a great opportunity to improve outcomes for persons with serious mental illness who become involved in its criminal justice system. I plan to identify the best practices from other Mental Health Courts in Michigan that could be started here in Grand Rapids," Hughes said.

The study is expected to be completed by September 30, 2017 to allow development of a proposal for an implementation grant during FY 2018 if recommended by the planning committee and accepted by the court and appropriate funding unit.

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“Treatment is a much more cost-effective way to deal with mental health issues, but it is also a more holistic course of action,” said Scott Gilman, Executive Director of Network180. “I look forward to the work we can do and the lives we can positively impact through this planning period.”

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