

Community Diversion Coordinator: Connecting Courts & Jails to Community Providers

Speakers

Elizabeth “Liz” Wiggins joined JCMH in the summer of 2021 and assisted with the roll out of JCMH’s technical assistance services to courts across Texas. She has experience as both a former prosecutor and defense attorney, and with various leadership roles while volunteering with local organizations. Liz has a passion for identifying and addressing the root issues to reduce recidivism, keep communities safe, and to elevate people to become the best versions of themselves. She is also a Facilitator for PRA’s Sequential Intercept Model Mapping.

Liz Wiggins, Moderator



Judge Chance Oliver



First elected in 2018, Judge Chance Oliver has served 3 years as Judge of Denton County Criminal Court at Law #4. As of October 2021, Judge Oliver is also the Criminal Judge responsible for overseeing a newly created grant program which seeks to divert offenders with various mental health disorders from jail to treatment. Prior to taking the bench, Judge Oliver worked as a private practice attorney where his areas of practice include, criminal, real estate and civil litigation. Judge Oliver also worked as an Assistant District Attorney with the Denton County District Attorney's Office where he prosecuted both juvenile and adult criminal cases.

Erica Baldwin is the Denton County Community Diversion Coordinator. She moved from Wisconsin to accept the role offered by Denton County in September 2021. While in Wisconsin, Erica worked with the Department of Human Services and Innervations Counseling and Consulting Center. In these roles, she directed multi-disciplinary teams to provide comprehensive community services by coordinating a team of service providers to address an individual’s critical mental health and substance use concerns to promote and support recovery. Additionally, she provided direct recovery services to individuals by working as an individual therapist, crisis prevention and intervention counselor, and psychosocial rehabilitation worker.

Erica Baldwin



Alessia Dal Monte



Alessia Dal Monte’s focus has been on the success of mental health care for underserved and stigmatized populations. While working towards a master’s degree in Psychological Science, Alessia’s research was centered on perception of, and motivations for substance use, observing quantitative data of public stigma towards people of color who use substances and qualitative data on trends in use motivation. It was noted that the overriding stigma continues, despite research that substance use trends with other detrimental environmental factors and is motivated by self-medication. It was this knowledge that laid the groundwork for Alessia’s current passion of mental health care for incarcerated folk and subsequently jail diversion.

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Summary

The JCMH partnered with the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) to develop a pilot project focused on enhancing coordination between courts and behavioral health providers. The Community Diversion Coordinator Pilot Program is intended to divert defendants with mental illness who are charged with nonviolent misdemeanor offenses from the criminal justice system.

Three counties – Denton, Grayson, and Smith Counties – were selected and were provided funding for a Community Diversion Coordinator, who is employed by either a lead criminal court judge in partnership with a probate judge or the county's Local Mental Health Authority (LMHA). The Community Diversion Coordinator reports to the lead judge, works with judges, lawyers, defendants, LMHA/LBHA and providers, and has access to jails, courts, and LMHA/LBHAs, including electronic health records, court records, case files, and 16.22 reports, as necessary to assist on the case.

To be considered for the program, counties had to show stakeholder support through written letters of support, acknowledgement of a commitment to participate in the planning and implementation phases, and demonstration of a commitment to work collaboratively.



JCMH Staff Attorney Liz Wiggins, who is the JCMH's lead on the Community Diversion Coordinator program, moderated a panel made of up representatives from Denton County:

- Judge Chance Oliver, County Criminal Court #4
- Erica Baldwin, Community Diversion Coordinator
- Alessia Dal Monte, Jail In-Reach Coordinator

The panelists explained "a day in the life" of the Community Diversion Coordinator, how the program has impacted Denton County Courts and the LMHA (Denton County MHMR Center), and how the role of the CDC provided awareness of these topics to the community at large.