

Lancaster County Named Stepping Up Innovator County

Lincoln, NE – February 20, 2025 – The Lancaster County Board is pleased to announce that Lancaster County has been named as one of a select group of Stepping Up Innovator Counties for its expertise in collecting baseline data on individuals in its jail who have serious mental illnesses.

Lancaster County achieved the Innovator County designation by using a three-step approach to obtain baseline data:

1. Using a shared definition of serious mental illness across criminal justice and behavioral health systems;
2. Screening every person booked into jail using a validated screening tool and referring those individuals for a mental health assessment based on the screening results (or staff judgment); and
3. Tracking and analyzing this data electronically.

Lancaster County is one of 54 counties nationwide that has received this designation for its remarkable efforts to better link people to treatment and services while reducing jail populations and improving public safety in effective and fiscally responsible ways.

In November 2023, Lancaster County partnered with Region 5 Systems to implement the Stepping Up Initiative. A jointly-funded Region 5 Systems' Project Coordinator continues to assist the Lancaster County Department of Corrections and Lancaster County Community Corrections with developing comprehensive, locally-based policies, practices, and programs to help reduce the number of individuals with a serious mental illness housed at the Lancaster County Jail by focusing on one or more key measures: jail bookings, jail length of stay, connections to treatment after release, and recidivism.

The County Board extends its thanks to Region 5 Systems and the multitude of agencies within the adult criminal justice field who played an important role in accomplishing the steps necessary to become an Innovator County and who continue to be invaluable to the success of the Stepping Up Initiative in our community.

Lancaster County Board Chair Rick Vest shared, “The County Board deeply appreciates Lancaster County being recognized as an Innovator County. It acknowledges the exceptional work being done by several County agencies and our partners in the criminal justice arena as we continue to address the ongoing challenge of reimagining our role within the support system for those with serious behavioral health issues in our community. Lancaster County is proud to have been asked to serve in another leadership position. Congratulations to everyone who helped us earn this recognition.”

Patrick Kreifels, Region 5 Systems Regional Administrator, stated, “Region 5 Systems’ mission is to support the wellness and recovery of people through the ongoing development and coordination of the behavioral health system of care. We envision a community where people experiencing, affected by, or at risk of mental health or substances use challenges receive care and enhance personal wellbeing. People in our community living with severe mental health and substance use challenges are vulnerable and at risk of involvement with the criminal justice system. We value and are thankful for our partnership with Lancaster County, the Nebraska Department of Health & Human Services-Division of Behavioral Health, network providers, and justice entities to support and implement the Stepping Up Initiative.”

Stepping Up is a national initiative to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in jails. The initiative—a collaboration between The Council of State Governments Justice Center, the National Association of Counties and the American Psychiatric Association Foundation—asks communities to come together to develop an action plan that can be used to achieve measurable impact in local criminal justice systems of all sizes across the country. For more information visit <https://stepuptogether.org>.

Established in 1859, Lancaster County is Nebraska’s second most populated county. Home to the University of Nebraska – Lincoln, Lancaster County is a growing and dynamic community. In collaboration with the City of Lincoln, Lancaster County provides a variety of services for residents and has been nationally recognized for its cooperation and progressive attitude in service to residents. The mission of the Lancaster County Board is to provide sustainable governmental service for a healthy, safe, diverse, and vibrant community.

For more information about Lancaster County, please visit the website at www.lancaster.ne.gov or call 402-441-7447.