



Ted Wheeler, Multnomah County Chair

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Statement of Multnomah County Chair Ted Wheeler June 25, 2009

The tragic death of Jim Chasse has forced everybody in the community to take a hard look at the ways we try and sometimes fail to help our neighbors who face the challenge of mental illness. From community discussions in the aftermath of Jim Chasse's death, important reforms have been identified and implemented and larger changes are in process. It is personally important to me that we demonstrate that Jim Chasse's death serves as a continuing reminder to us of the need to substantially improve the way the community responds to mental illness and build systems of support that can sustain recovery. Recovery must be our goal.

Multnomah County's settlement of the lawsuit arising from Jim Chasse's death will end our participation in legal proceedings but it in no way ends our efforts to follow through with reforms advanced in the wake of the tragedy. The big problems in the global economy and the financial collapse of our largest local mental health provider have slowed our progress toward a new mental health crisis center, but we are still moving forward.

In 2006, after I was elected County Chair but before I took office, I co-chaired the Task Force on Mental Health and Public Safety organized by Mayor Potter. Working closely with Senator Avel Gordley, we listened to the community, consulted diverse stakeholders and developed an action list of changes that were needed to get better outcomes for people with mental illness and the public safety professionals that protect our community.

Improved training of public safety staff regarding mental health issues was a top priority and that has been in place for more than two years now. Guidelines on the use of force by law enforcement have been revised. Booking procedures at the jail have changed. Mental health professionals have increased their collaboration with law enforcement officers.

We all agree that there are too many people with mental illness in jail. Since 2007, we have been working to open a new facility where trained staff can assess and treat people with mental illness who come into contact with police officers. The center would provide a continuum of support that would help bolster recovery, find and maintain housing and offer the kinds of services that would allow people with mental illness to move toward independence.

I still cannot predict the date that the mental health treatment and assessment center will open its doors, but I am confident we will get there. The financial collapse of Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare in 2008 was a temporary set-back. The severe budget cuts we faced this year meant that we could only put a million dollars towards moving the project forward, but we do have a plan.

Central City Concern is remodeling the old Ramada hotel and will move their detox facility to that new site. The current detox site will be remodeled to serve as the mental health crisis center. Much of the funding is in place and we will move aggressively to complete the project.

Next week the Board of County Commissioners will consider a resolution on the development of the mental health assessment and treatment center. This discussion will take place at the same meeting that we consider the settlement of the lawsuit arising from Jim Chasse's death. It is important that we reach closure on this tragedy, but we must also remember the lessons we have learned and redouble our efforts to prevent future tragedies.