For immediate release: **June 10, 2020**

**Pandemic Poses Special Challenges for Probation Officers Monitoring Clients with Mental Health Issues**

Jessica Cannon has always tried to stay connected to the specialized group of probation clients she monitors.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it more critical that she maintain contact. And that hasn’t been easy in some cases.

Even with the stay-at-home order that has been in place since March, probation officers are monitoring their clients and meeting extra challenges

Cannon, who monitors 42 probation clients with mental health issues, asked her clients - who she was used to seeing in person - to make sure they called her once a week to check in.

One of Cannon’s clients is homeless and doesn’t have access to a phone unless he goes to his parent’s house. She decided she would be available to answer her phone if he called and texted her, no matter the time or day.

“I know his situation,” said Cannon, a senior probation officer in the Middlesex Vicinage. “If I see his number, I pick up. I want to connect with him, and he likes being able to text me because he doesn’t have any anxiety.”

Many probation clients have undiagnosed mental health conditions that go undetected after their initial entry into the criminal justice system. Probation officers with adult mental health caseloads not only monitor offenders, they connect them to and work closely with substance abuse treatment providers, social services agencies and medical services.

The probation adult mental health caseload began as a pilot in May 2010. There are 1,058 clients in the mental health caseload and 27 mental health probation officers statewide. Each probation officer has about 35 clients.

Among the conditions clients have been diagnosed with are schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depressive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder.

In addition to their mental health issues, some clients have other hurdles to overcome, including homelessness and a lack of technology to keep them connected to their probation officers.

For probation officers, in-person meetings and treatment were critical to gauging how clients were doing, often through their body language and mannerisms.

Officers said most clients have adapted through remote reporting and curbside contact. Supervisors and officers work closely and remotely with treatment/service providers, and officers encourage clients to attend treatment sessions and groups virtually.

“If you’re used to going to a program every day and you don’t have a structure, it’s difficult, but most are getting through it,” said Tracy Weiss, a senior probation officer who monitors about 45 mental health clients in the Atlantic/Cape May Vicinage. “They’re making it through, but it hasn’t been easy.”

Cannon said for some clients virtual counseling is working because “they can be at home and not have people looking at them and judging them.”

To help address the unique issues involving mental health clients, a probation crisis awareness training in February allowed mental health probation officers to connect with local emergency mental health screeners, county mental health administrators and other state and local service providers. The Judiciary also held virtual trainings for new officers on May 8 and May 22.

“Throughout this pandemic, mental health probation officers across the state show great professionalism, dedication and compassion in their efforts to better meet the needs of clients with serious mental illnesses,” said Rashad Shabaka-Burns, director of probation services for the New Jersey Judiciary.

“These officers are creatively adapting to this new environment by engaging remotely with treatment providers; using technology to maintain contact with their clients; offering information and support; and providing referrals to the many virtual community resources available, to assist clients with ongoing recovery needs,” Shabaka-Burns said.

# # #