First 100 Correctional Staff Have Completed Mental Health First Aid Training

PITTSBURGH – Warden Orlando Harper today announced that over 100 staff members have now completed Mental Health First Aid training being facilitated by the Department of Human Services’ trainers. The training of jail staff began in November. Based on the current schedule, all employees will have completed the offered training by the end of March. The effort is a joint initiative between the Allegheny County Jail and the Department of Human Services (DHS).

"Having all of our employees trained in mental health first aid is important for our correctional officers and other staff members because it allows them to recognize the signs and symptoms of a person who may be experiencing mental or emotional distress and to then react accordingly," Harper said. "As a result of this training, our staff will have an improved understanding of what they may be seeing in an incarcerated individual, and equips them with the tools they need to start a dialogue and connect them with the appropriate treatment and resources."

More than 2.5 million people across the United States have been trained in Mental Health First Aid according to the National Council for Mental Wellbeing that has provided training since 2001. The training covers topics related to mental health care, including mental health literacy, combating stigma of mental illness, enabling early intervention through recognition of signs and symptoms, and connecting people to care.

"As correctional officers, it’s important for us to continue our learning and development," said Mat Olean, a correctional officer who completed the training in November. "This training gave us the skills to deal with the mental health and drug issues that exist not only in the jail, but across the nation, as well. The training helped provide us with a better understanding of how to treat people."

Today’s correctional facilities have significant numbers of incarcerated individuals who also have mental health concerns. Forty (40) percent of the Allegheny County Jail’s current population are on some type of mental health medication. The number of people taking mental health medications is not a true picture of mental health in the facility:

- According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), 20.6 percent of U.S. adults experienced mental illness in 2019 which represents 1 in 5 adults
- The National Institute of Mental Health (NIH) estimates that only half of people with mental illnesses receive treatment
- The CDC has also indicated that measures necessary to reduce the spread of COVID-19, which are heightened in the jail, can make people feel isolated and lonely, and increase stress and anxiety
- Mental Health America estimates that 1.2 million individuals living with mental illness are in jail and prison each year.

"Mental Health First Aid training is a fantastic foundational course for all first responders and staff working alongside people who may be experiencing the impacts of trauma or suffer from mental illness," said Denise Macerelli, Deputy Director the DHS Office of Behavioral Health. "This course will
give the jail staff the knowledge and skills to recognize signs of trauma and escalating symptoms of acute illness."

This training is one of three related trainings that were announced last fall for jail staff members. Staff will also be provided crisis intervention, de-escalation and implicit bias training later this year.

The Allegheny County Jail is accredited by the American Correctional Association.

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