July 28, 2017

Joe Parisi, County Executive
210 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., Room 421
Madison, WI  53703

Dear Mr. Parisi,

The League of Women Voters of Dane County understands that we cannot continue to incarcerate people in the unsafe, unsanitary, and unhealthy cells in the City-County Building. We share your publicly expressed concern that any replacement plan should be cost-effective.

We also understand that Dane County has taken some steps to limit the number of our fellow residents who are in the jail. We applaud the expansion of the Community Restorative Court, and we congratulate the county for implementing a public safety assessment at initial court appearance to help determine which individuals could be released before trial.

In order to limit jail costs in Dane County, we need to expand mental health and substance abuse services so people who need treatment don’t end up in our jail. The share of county funds directed to mental health services has declined in relation to population growth and in relation to the share allocated to the criminal justice budget.

We hear very disturbing reports of gaps in our community-based services for mentally ill people at risk of incarceration. A volunteer with the Hoover Foundation reported to the Criminal Justice Council in May that this spring she was able to enroll a recently released inmate into Badger Care, but he needed psychiatric medications to stay stable. The first appointment she could arrange was six weeks away.

We also hear that finding mental health treatment for individuals with no insurance, or whose insurance is fee-for-service Medicaid, is extraordinarily difficult.

The December Mead & Hunt report noted that some individuals with mental health issues could be diverted from the jail.

In September, 2015, the Workgroup that examined Mental Health, Solitary Confinement, and Incarceration in our criminal justice system recommended that Dane County “Develop a culturally relevant community-based crisis, assessment and resource center.” It also recommended more community-based services.

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The August, 2016, Diversion Work Group report to the H&HN and PP&J committees similarly recommended “Development of a short-term crisis/stabilization program that includes the capacity for short-term (up to 7 days) residential placement, crisis assessment, linking individuals to other community resources, etc. This type of program has commonly been referred to as a “restoration center”.”

Other counties around the country report success with such restoration centers. Bexar County in Texas reports that its full program, which includes a restoration center as a central component, saves more than $10 million annually on averted jail and emergency room costs.

There are similar facilities in Arizona and Tennessee.

Texas: http://www.naco.org/resources/mental-health-and-criminal-justice-case-study-bexar-county

If we don’t spend time and resources on approaches that offer a chance to save money and better serve our citizens, we will surely spend extra millions of dollars building extra cells and incarcerating people who should be getting treatment instead. And we know that is bad for the inmates and bad for public safety and bad for Dane County taxpayers.

We look forward to your leadership on this issue.

Sincerely,

Brook Soltvedt
President