

# Audit at a glance

## Mental Health Services in Denver's Jail System

JUNE 2022

**ABOUT** | The Sheriff Department provides mental health services, both internally and through contractors, to individuals housed in its jail system. All individuals receive a mental health assessment when entering jail to help identify issues, such as drug and alcohol addiction or behavioral conditions. Individuals are then able to receive the necessary care both while in jail and when returning to the community. From July 2019 through June 2022 the total cost of mental health programs and services was as high as \$66.4 million.



## In the report

### **FINDING: The Denver Sheriff Department Does Not Have a Strategy for Its Mental Health Programs**

- The department's decentralized mental health programs lack a defined strategy. The Sheriff Department has a variety of mental health programs that provide services such as education, life skills, social services, reentry back into the community, substance abuse mitigation, and other effective tools to help people become more productive and avoid additional criminal activity once they return to the community; however, the programs lack oversight. Meanwhile, one program appears inequitable because it is offered only to men.

### **FINDING: The Denver Sheriff Department's Data Processes Should Be Improved**

- The Denver Sheriff Department tracks data on the participants of its mental health programs, general and mental health requests and complaints, and mental health and medical services — but inconsistencies and errors in the data and the lack of a data-quality review processes makes the data unreliable. Paper medical charts and manual data entry may complicate both mental health services and continuity of care.

### **FINDING: The Denver Sheriff Department Is Not Sufficiently Monitoring Mental Health Contracts and Invoices**

- The Denver Sheriff Department has 20 active contracts and grants related to mental health programs and services. While the department is generally ensuring compliance with contract terms, it is not adequately monitoring the performance of its contractors. This lack of oversight hinders the department's ability to ensure all contract deliverables are met, that contractors are providing quality mental health services, and that taxpayer dollars and funding from grants are being used effectively and efficiently.

#### **WHY THIS MATTERS**

The audit objective was to determine whether the Denver Sheriff Department's mental health services and programs are effective in providing support for people in jail as well as employees of the Denver jail system. If the Sheriff Department's mental health programs and operations are not effectively helping individuals in need or those who are at high risk, these people may not successfully return to the community and might instead cycle back through the jail system.

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The department should establish oversight of contracts and invoices to ensure terms are met and that payments are allowed. Additionally, without sufficient monitoring, the department cannot determine the quality of mental health services contractors provide.

**FINDING: The Denver Sheriff Department Could Not Demonstrate All Individuals Identifying as Transgender Were Assessed and Housed According to Their Preference**

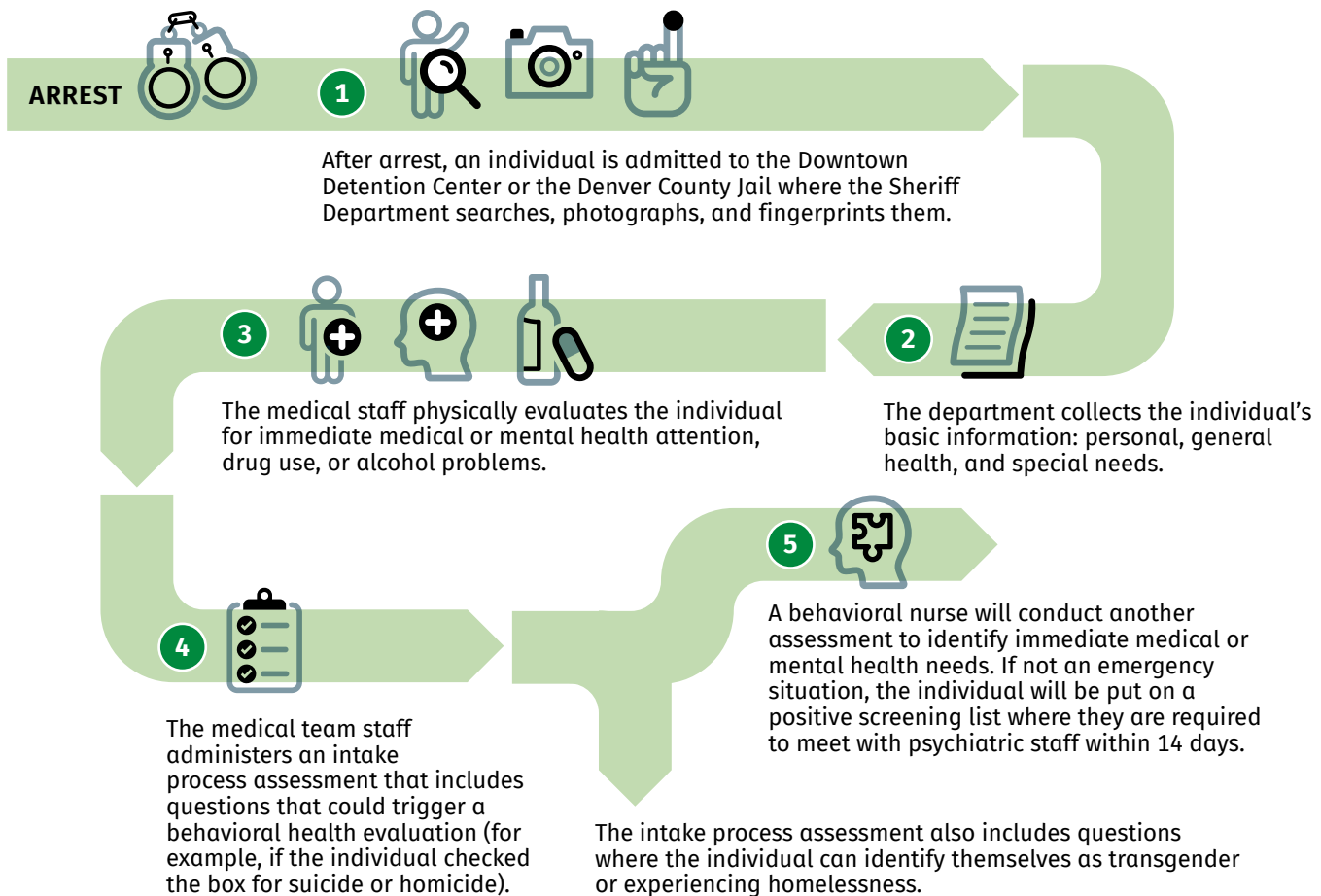
- The department has an informal Transgender Review Board that is responsible for assessing and making recommendations related to housing, medical, and mental health needs for people identifying as transgender within 72-hours of their entering the jail system. The mental health needs that are assessed are related to issues such as self-harm, or whether that person is having a mental health episode. When someone identifying as transgender is in custody,

they are temporarily placed in restrictive or separate housing in the medical unit for their safety. The department could not provide evidence to show it met with all individuals identifying as transgender in line with policy and that they were not housed for longer than 72 hours in separate housing before receiving an initial assessment.

**FINDING: The Denver Sheriff Department Could Not Demonstrate Compliance with Training Requirements**

- Denver Sheriff Department policy says that deputies must be able to reasonably recognize behaviors related to mental health conditions. The policy also outlines the mental health awareness and training that deputies must complete to properly tend to those in jail. However, the department could not provide adequate documentation to show it was following training requirements, which include mental health classes for staff.

**Mental Health Assessment at the Denver Sheriff Department's Intake Process**



Source: Created by Auditor's Office staff using information from Denver Sheriff Department orders and interviews.

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