

Snohomish County Jail Launches Pilot Videoconferencing Program for Competency Evaluations

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EVERETT, Wash. – The Snohomish County jail, in collaboration with the [Department of Social and Health Services' Office of Forensic Mental Health Services](#), has launched a new pilot videoconferencing program that provides the capability for State forensic evaluators to conduct some pre-trial competency evaluations via videoconferencing. The program establishes a previously non-existent secure videoconferencing network between the jail and forensic evaluators located at the state hospitals or other locations. Competency evaluations help establish whether an inmate is mentally capable to stand trial.

The goal of the Forensic Evaluation Videoconferencing Pilot Project is to reduce the wait time for competency evaluations, especially for inmates incarcerated for misdemeanors who suffer from significant mental illness. The program also provides easier access for an inmate's attorney to participate in the evaluation process, as well as reduces safety risks associated with moving inmates and staff throughout the facility.

“The program will be a great benefit for our inmates who suffer from mental illness by creating a more efficient process for completing competency evaluations,” said Sheriff Ty Trenary. “We hope that the evaluation process will be much quicker and so inmates can get into treatment and connected with the resources they need.”

“We are excited to be adding the videoconferencing capability to Snohomish County jail's medical unit,” said Health Services Administrator Alta Langdon. “With the limited number of State forensic evaluators, videoconferencing will drastically reduce the amount of travel time evaluators face commuting from one facility to the next. The program will also ensure an inmate's attorney can be present from a distant location. We hope it is a win for all parties involved.”

“The Snohomish County jail is the flagship site for the new program,” said Dr. David D. Luxton of the Office of Forensic Mental Health Services and state-wide lead for the program. “We are certain that the success of the program at the jail will help us to expand the program to all county jails across the state.”

In 2016, there were more than 18,000 referrals of Snohomish County correctional facility inmates to jail mental health professionals (MHPs) and the MHPs had face-to-face contact with 3,400 inmates for mental health-related issues.

Staff from the Office of Forensic Mental Health Services conduct an average of 10-15 competency evaluations every week at the Snohomish County jail.

Snohomish County is the first of four jails in Washington State to pilot the new videoconferencing program. In 2015, [the jail partnered with Western State Hospital to begin offering on-site competency evaluations](#) to inmates.

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