

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/breaking-point/laying-the-groundwork-for-a-more-inclusive-mental-health-system>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

WNYC's Breaking Point series paints a vivid picture of a city where far too many people are struggling with mental illness on their own, and in the shadows. I recently met a woman whose experience illustrates the peril many New Yorkers face and also the promise of a more enlightened approach to treating mental illness. I will call her Leslie.

Leslie is a native of St. Croix who now lives in Queens. She works as a home health aide and is raising two children on her own: a 19-year-old daughter, and a 16-year-old son I'll call Markus.

By all accounts, Markus is a quiet and sensitive young man. Like all of us, he sometimes gets angry but hasn't yet figured out how to control that anger.

A few months ago, Markus got into a fight in the cafeteria and punched a classmate. Not knowing what to do, he panicked and left school grounds. When Leslie convinced him to go back, he was arrested.

Since that day, the lives of Markus and Leslie have been thrown into turmoil. They had to get an attorney. Markus had to find a new high school. And Leslie stopped attending classes at LaGuardia Community College.

It's easy to imagine things getting even worse. And Leslie and Markus certainly aren't out of the woods yet. But their story took a turn in the right direction when the Department of Education connected them to Jennifer Jones.

Jennifer is an experienced social worker at the Family Resource Center in Jamaica, Queens. The center is administered by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and provides support to the parents and caregivers of young people who have or are at risk of developing emotional and behavioral challenges. They are staffed by people who have personal experience raising a child with special needs and connecting him or her to effective programs and services.

Jennifer accompanied Leslie and Markus to court dates and helped them figure out their legal options. She spent hours talking with them about all of the factors that led to his arrest. And she helped Markus find a new school, which he really likes so far.

This story isn't over yet, but when I met with Leslie, it was clear that after many months of despair, she had regained her footing. What she and Markus had needed all along was some help and now they are finally getting it.

There are nine Family Resource Centers throughout the five boroughs, serving almost 3,000 people annually. And while that's great, everyone agrees that it's not nearly enough. We need to help people like Markus get the mental health services they need *before* they end up in court. And that will require rethinking the entire system.

This administration understands that. Last year, Mayor de Blasio convened a task force focused on reducing the number of people with behavioral health needs who are cycling through our criminal justice and health systems. You can learn more about the task force from the Breaking Point [blog post](#) by Elizabeth Glazer, Director of the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice.

I have also made a commitment to help the city develop a more inclusive mental health system. We need a system that meets people where they live. A system that addresses the most pervasive and burdensome conditions. A system with caregivers who understand the language and culture of the people they serve.

Right now, three different organizations are working together to lay the groundwork: the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City, which I oversee as chair; the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene; and the Fund for Public Health.

To support this work, I am visiting New Yorkers in all five boroughs. I want to hear from more people like Leslie and Jennifer because they know better than anyone what's working, and what needs to be fixed. It won't be easy, but I am confident that together we will succeed in creating a more virtuous cycle when it comes to mental health and criminal justice.

Vera is pleased to complement the WNYC broadcast, *Breaking Point: New York's Mental Health Crisis*, with [a blog series](#) that features the voices of experts from a range of fields as they examine how the nexus of poverty, mental health, and the criminal justice system affects nearly every aspect of New York City life.

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