

California Introduces 'CARE Court': Innovative Program for Psychosis Treatment



California is taking a significant step forward in addressing the needs of individuals with psychotic disorders by introducing the Community Assistance, Recovery and Empowerment Court program, also known as "CARE Court." This groundbreaking initiative, authorized by the Community Assistance, Recovery and Empowerment Act (CARE Act) and signed into law in September 2022, establishes a new civil court system to facilitate comprehensive mental health treatment for those in need.

Under the CARE Act, a variety of individuals, including first responders, family members, social services providers, and behavioral health providers, are empowered to file petitions in the civil court system to refer individuals into the CARE Court program. This program is set to be implemented initially in eight counties by October, with plans for statewide expansion, as reported by NPR and The Washington Post.

Upon filing a petition, a judge will order a thorough evaluation of the individual. If deemed eligible for the program, a personalized treatment plan will be developed, tailored to address their specific needs. This treatment plan may include medication, assistance with housing, and access to other essential social services.

The CARE Court program offers a one-year treatment period, with the possibility of an extension for an additional year. Even after completing the program, participants remain eligible for ongoing treatment and support services to ensure sustained progress.

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It's important to note that while individuals who fail to comply with their care plans may face hospitalization or referral for a conservatorship, they cannot be forcibly medicated or subjected to involuntary treatment unless authorized by a state law passed in 1967, as reported by The Los Angeles Times.

Additionally, individuals found unfit to stand trial in criminal cases are also eligible for the CARE Court program. Failure to accept care could result in potential prosecution.

According to The Washington Post, California has allocated a budget of up to \$215 million annually for the CARE Court program, with estimated eligibility for approximately 12,000 individuals per year. This innovative initiative aims to provide an alternative to jail or conservatorship, offering mentally ill defendants a middle ground that respects their autonomy while ensuring they receive the necessary care and support.

Despite its promising potential, the CARE Court program does face some challenges. A shortage of healthcare workers and a lack of available housing pose obstacles to its successful implementation.

Disability Rights California, a nonprofit organization, had previously filed a petition with the California Supreme Court seeking to halt the program. However, the justices declined to hear the case, allowing the program to proceed.

Christian Abasto, the legal director of Disability Rights California, expressed concerns regarding the program, fearing that it may inadvertently lead to involuntary treatment through conservatorship. Abasto worries that the law empowers various parties, such as parents, police, and school personnel, to make accusations and invoke the court system, potentially infringing upon the civil rights of individuals with mental health disabilities.

The CARE Court program represents a significant step forward in California's commitment to providing comprehensive mental health treatment for individuals with psychotic disorders. By offering a compassionate and supportive pathway to recovery and empowerment, this program aims to improve the lives of thousands of Californians needing specialized care.