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MDOC launches specialized unit for inmates with mental health, substance use challenges

PEARL - A new unit is operating at the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility as a treatment environment for inmates diagnosed with mental illness, substance use disorders, or a combination of both.

The specialized Behavioral Management Unit (BMU) is guided by Qualified Behavioral Health Professionals and is designed to support individuals who are particularly vulnerable in the general population. Admission into the BMU begins with a recommendation from professional mental health staff and concludes with approval from the BMU commander and the facility superintendent.

“Since its implementation, the BMU has contributed to measurable improvements in both health outcomes and facility stability, CMCF Mental Health Director Jasmine Nelson said. “We have observed a notable decrease in medical emergencies related to substance use, including incidents associated with withdrawal, intoxication, and relapse-driven behavior. “Individuals experiencing acute mental illness are now able to receive more intensive, coordinated care, including closer psychiatric monitoring, medication management, and structured therapeutic intervention,” Nelson added.

Approximately 40 individuals have participated in the program to date, with the majority remaining actively engaged in ongoing treatment and rehabilitative services. The unit is designed for up to 78 individuals.

Rather than relying solely on punitive measures, the BMU offers a therapeutic alternative centered on clinical stabilization, treatment, and recovery. The unit delivers immediate intervention for individuals in crisis through evidence-based practices, including Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), and trauma-informed care.

Participants engage in multiple weekly sessions tailored to their clinical needs, including psychotherapy, relapse prevention, and life skills development, along with individualized psychiatric care. Classes are developed based on the needs of the population and are taught by professional mental health personnel, ensuring that treatment remains responsive and individualized.

The long-term goal of the program is to stabilize participants' mental health and place them on a sustainable path toward recovery upon completion. Another, but unrelated, program at the South Mississippi Correctional Institution has a similar goal.

The Houses of Healing program is an intensive 13-session rehabilitative program focused on emotional growth and trauma recovery. Over the past three years, approximately 100 individuals have completed the program. "Houses of Healing is built on the understanding that many criminal and addictive behaviors stem from unresolved trauma, grief, and chronic anger," said SMCI Programs Director Lisa Herndon.

Through peer-led group sessions and a structured curriculum, participants develop skills in emotional regulation, accountability, and conflict resolution. "The program has shown positive outcomes, including fewer disciplinary infractions, improved anger management, and stronger interpersonal relationships," Herndon said. Participants also report increased hopefulness and a greater sense of personal responsibility.



