

## What does PESS do?

First we'll take a look at the definitions for the Mental Health Screening Law in New Jersey. This is the specific law that clearly states the role of the screening center. It can be found under New Jersey Statutes number **30:4-27.1**.

**"Dangerous to self"** means that by reason of mental illness the person has threatened or attempted suicide or serious bodily harm, or has behaved in such a manner as to indicate that the person is unable to satisfy his need for nourishment, essential medical care or shelter, so that it is probable that substantial bodily injury, serious physical debilitation or death will result within the reasonably foreseeable future; however, no person shall be deemed to be unable to satisfy his need for nourishment, essential medical care or shelter if he is able to satisfy such needs with the supervision and assistance of others who are willing and available.

**"Dangerous to others or property"** means that by reason of mental illness there is a substantial likelihood that the person will inflict serious bodily harm upon another person or cause serious property damage within the reasonably foreseeable future. This determination shall take into account a person's history, recent behavior and any recent act or threat.

**"In need of involuntary commitment"** means that an *adult who is mentally ill*, whose mental illness causes the person to be dangerous to self or dangerous to others or property and who is unwilling to be admitted to a facility voluntarily for care, and who needs care at a short-term care, psychiatric facility or special psychiatric hospital because other services are not appropriate or available to meet the person's mental health care needs.

**"Mental illness"** means a current, substantial disturbance of thought, mood, perception or orientation which significantly impairs judgment, capacity to control behavior or capacity to recognize reality, but does **not** include simple alcohol intoxication, transitory reaction to drug ingestion, organic brain syndrome or developmental disability unless it results in the severity of impairment described herein. The term mental illness is not limited to "psychosis" or "active psychosis," but shall include all conditions that result in the severity of impairment described herein.

Key points to the law are that the person being evaluated is an adult. There is no screening law for children and adolescents under the age of 18. However, when an evaluation is being done the same questions must be answered:

1. Is the person dangerous?
2. Is the dangerousness due to mental illness?  
Excluded from the criteria for mental illness are alcohol intoxication, drug ingestion, organic brain syndrome (obs) i.e. dementia or developmental disability.
3. Are there less restrictive means to treat the patient? For example outpatient, etc. If so, clinically they do not meet the criteria for commitment and more importantly for hospitalization.

Another definition of note from the statute is:

"Screening service" means a public or private ambulatory care service designated by the commissioner, which provides mental health services including assessment, emergency and referral services to **mentally ill persons** in a specified geographic area.

## **What does PESS do?**

A screening center is set up to provide emergency assessments of those people that are either unwilling or unable to seek care and to provide necessary paperwork to law enforcement to secure their return to a screening center for further evaluation.

There is no such standard for children. The screening center cannot provide transport nor can they mandate that the police transport a minor. Only a guardian can request this and can provide consent for treatment and evaluation. There are instances where the courts may become involved- if a parent is endangering the child or refusing medical care but these are extreme circumstances.

## **What doesn't PESS do?**

We do not assess issues that are behavioral in nature such as school refusal, disobedience in the home, legal issues.

We do not provide medication, prescriptions, medication refills or get earlier psychiatric appointments. We work under the same waiting lists as the rest of the county when making referrals for outpatient and are not able to get earlier appointments.

We do not give letters guaranteeing anyone's safety. If a child is in school you can assume that they did not meet the criteria of dangerousness due to mental illness. Could there still be criminal issues that need to be explored outside the setting of PESS? YES.

We do not provide counseling or ongoing treatment. We are an emergency service.

We do not make appointments. We are located in each emergency room and operate in the same manner as an emergency room where cases from through out the county are triaged in the order of emergent versus urgent care needed. As such our response time can vary greatly depending on current staffing and current acuity in the county.

We do not do psychiatric, psychological, or neurological testing.

We do not provide respite beds.

We do not provide treatment or assess for drug or alcohol addiction nor do we find treatment beds.

## **About our mobile teams**

Our mobile teams can be dispatched to a home to do an assessment. Primarily we are assessing for dangerousness due to mental illness with the final decision being whether the person needs to return to the hospital for either 1) further evaluation 2) to arrange for psychiatric hospitalization.

Depending on level of dangerousness we may determine that it is necessary for the police to accompany us. We are assessing someone that another person or agency has felt is dangerous and staff safety is a primary concern. If a situation is that urgent that safety cannot be maintained prior to PESS arrival police should be called by the referring person. While we are an emergency service we cover a large geographic area and a huge population and cannot guarantee a response time. Also, if the situation is felt to be imminently dangerous your first call should be to police not PESS (i.e. weapons involved, suicide attempt already made).

## **What does PESS do?**

### **Why we ask that you call first before sending a child**

Through our main location at Kimball Medical Center we triage each case as it comes in. We have a hotline that is accessible 24 hours a day/ 7 days a week. We cover the whole county... every home, school, police department, emergency room, public and private setting. The charge person on the unit is responsible for orchestrating the responses to all these locations and triaging the calls that come in. While we recognize that to each caller their call is urgent to them there may be situations within the county that require a more immediate response. We also have information on what hospitals are on divert, which means that they are no longer accepting new patients due to high patient levels in the emergency room. We also know how many patients are waiting for evaluations in each emergency room and what the approximate wait will be. It makes good sense to call prior to sending a client or student so we can work collaboratively to determine the best place and time for the patient to be seen while maintaining their safety.

Also, be aware that there are now staff at every emergency room in the county. Sending an out of control child or someone who has overdosed past other emergency rooms directly to Kimball can be considered negligence. We do not provide care differently in the different emergency rooms and there is no reason to bypass closer ER's (unless directed to do so)