

**NEBRASKA TAXPAYERS FOR FREEDOM ISSUE PAPER:
NEW MENTAL HEALTH CENTER WILL COST DOUGLAS CO. TAXPAYERS.**

BACKGROUND. Douglas County lacks a long-term residential mental health care facility and capacity. Actually, there are no community long-term residential mental health services in the entire metro area. No one can argue that there exists an increased need for mental health services, particularly detox and suicide prevention services. Mental health cases are rising precipitously, and federal funding is expiring. Douglas County wants a 1/2c sales tax on residents to pay for a new, grandiose mental health center downtown. **LB 381**, introduced by socialist Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh, would allow the county to levy this tax in addition to its current property tax. However, the county has the option to seek an interlocal agreement with UNMC to operate and maintain such facility, could join a private institution in a partnership, or could consult with neighboring counties to establish a regional mental health center. These alternative community partnerships would not become so costly to Douglas Co. taxpayers. Yet, liberal commissioners prefer to forge ahead with this expensive project, plus add a mental health annex to the county jail. Understand also that the state does not require a county to offer mental health services.



NEW FACILITY PLAN. The present facility on 42nd Street was not designed for mental health care and is seriously outmoded. A new facility would arise on the site of the old Greyhound bus station, the property now belonging to the county. A parking lot to the south would serve as the site parking. The posh facility would boast natural lighting, calming rooms, gardens, and 2 courtyards.

FINANCING. Federal pandemic funds would pay for construction but not operational costs. It would cost \$180,000 to demolish the bus station, \$950,000 to prepare the site, and \$16,700,000 in new construction to build the new building. Total cost, including furniture and equipment, between \$23,085,000 and \$25,515,000. Additional costs for parking. Proponents would use \$50 million of federal pandemic funds and \$8 million from the county reserve fund to pay for initial costs, then utilize additional county reserve funds and inheritance taxes to fund ongoing expenses. However, the county may require its general fund reserves in future years to pay for unexpected expenses and emergencies. The Legislature is unlikely to pass legislation allowing a county sales tax. Inevitably, a tax hike will become necessary to pay for ongoing facility operation and maintenance and staff.

THE JAIL ANNEX. New construction, renovation, and modifications, together with new furniture and equipment, would total between \$31,295,800 and \$34,590,000, renovations themselves totaling \$632,000. First year operating costs would total \$752,540. The 2 facilities could combine food services. An annex required for several reasons. The jail not designed to safely handle mental health needs for inmates. About 42% of all those booked into jail have mental illness diagnoses. 50% of the latest jail addition houses the seriously mentally ill. There are no secure spaces there to hold and treat the mentally ill. There are no private or secure rooms for medical personnel to meet with mentally ill inmates. Areas needed for close supervision of and stabilization of the mentally ill. There is space to construct a facility annex, where the county can isolate the mentally ill, separate from the general jail population. An annex would provide safer environments for medical professionals and family members. Staffing costs would increase by \$530,000; operations and maintenance costs would total \$222,540. However, jail inmates not eligible for Medicare/Medicaid reimbursement, so their services funded by our local property taxes.

OUR ALTERNATIVE PREFERENCES. Our NTF group supports one alternative that would entail building a new facility on the county 42nd street campus. The county already owns this property, and there is ample room to expand. Therefore, taxpayers would not have to pay for land costs. This location would eliminate the negative stigma of a facility adjacent to the county jail. Lower construction, staffing, and operational costs here because of the location. Planners could use federal pandemic dollars here. The county could use mental health patient eligibility for federal Medicare/Medicaid reimbursement for operating costs at a new facility here but not at the county jail. This facility could share costs of food, laundry, security, maintenance, and other staff with the neighboring Health Center, also share program and administration space in order to expand existing programs. Public transportation is easily available to this site. This alternative could bring cooperation with UNMC in a new facility on county property or university property, thus sharing costs and establish a medical corridor reaching from UNMC to Veterans Hospital. Still another alternative is to work with a private partner in this enterprise. A final alternative is to create an interlocal agreement with adjacent counties to build a regional mental health center on county land. Statistics between 2016 and 2022 show that the number of inpatients served

and inpatient days at the current facility both have decreased, also outpatient clinical services, so one facility could house patients from several counties. Each of these alternatives would provide safe, long-term residential mental health services, with federal pandemic fund paying for much of the total cost at 42nd Street. County taxpayers would greatly benefit.

FINAL DECISION. The final decision to build and let contracts must occur before summer.



TAKE ACTION NOW. The proposal advocated by liberal Douglas County Commissioners would force county taxpayers eventually to pay higher taxes to operate, maintain, and staff 2 facilities. There is ample space at the 42nd Street campus to build a new facility or add onto the current facility and provide convenient parking. Debatable if a jail annex necessary or unused space there adequate. Necessary for taxpaying citizens to strongly lobby their county commissioners to examine and pursue the more economical alternatives commented

upon above, because commissioners must make a decision soon. Using the information above, lobby your county commissioner today! Email netaxpayers@gmail.com for commissioner contact information and join our NTF *Douglas County Watch Project*.

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