Like jails and prisons across the country, the detention center of the Chatham County (Georgia) Sheriff’s Office has seen a steady rise in the mental health needs of its inmates. After 44 years with the county detention center and being elected sheriff in April 2016, Sheriff John Wilcher made mental healthcare a top priority. “Correctional facilities have become the country’s largest mental health providers,” Sheriff Wilcher says. According to the sheriff, there were simply not enough mental health resources in the community, and the jail had become the mental health facility of last resort.
Personally answering all calls from inmates’ family members, Sheriff Wilcher noticed a growing number had concerns about the mental health needs of their loved ones. Because of his experience and observations, he wanted to ensure two things:

- The inmates in his care and custody received not only the medical attention they needed, but also the appropriate mental healthcare.
- Mentally ill inmates awaiting trial did not spend a disproportionate amount of time in the facility compared to those without a mental illness.

“That is why we devoted the time, attention, and resources necessary to achieve NCCHC accreditation for mental health services as well as health services.”

Standards That Address Health and Mental Health Needs

That commitment led Chatham County to become the first facility in the country to achieve accreditation from the National Commission on Correctional Health Care (NCCHC) as well as the first to achieve dual accreditation in mental health and health services.

NCCHC is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to improve the quality of healthcare in jails, prisons, and juvenile confinement facilities. They began accrediting health services in correctional facilities in the late 1970s, based on standards created by the American Medical Association’s Jail Project to combat what was then subpar healthcare in jails. NCCHC, which spun off from the AMA in 1983, continually updates those standards, which are the most widely respected correctional healthcare standards available.

As jails and prisons across the country grappled with a steady rise in inmates with mental health needs, NCCHC responded by creating standards specifically for mental health
services in 2008. The organization also produces resource publications; conducts educational conferences; and offers a certification program for health, security, and other professionals working in correctional healthcare. NCCHC is supported by major national organizations in the fields of health, mental health, law, and corrections, including the American Jail Association. Liaisons from these organizations comprise a robust, multidisciplinary board of directors that reflects the complexities of correctional healthcare.

The NCCHC accreditation survey is recognized as the most rigorous and comprehensive of its kind, involving an on-site survey conducted by experienced correctional health professionals to verify that the facility is in compliance with NCCHC’s standards. That’s why earning NCCHC accreditation is a significant achievement.

**Quest for Quality**

Around the same time that Sheriff Wilcher made a commitment to tackle the problem, the county was in the process of selecting a new medical provider. CorrectHealth was awarded the contract and the sheriff made his goals clear.

The journey to Chatham County’s accomplishment began at an NCCHC conference, where representatives from the county and CorrectHealth attended an accreditation workshop led by NCCHC’s accreditation staff.

“We were looking for an efficient improvement process, so we jumped at the idea,” says Todd Freesemann, CCHP, Chatham County’s director of policy and accreditation.

“Since we were already working toward accreditation for health services, we knew NCCHC’s is the best third-party accreditation in the field,” adds Susan Hatfield, FNP-C, CCHP-RN, executive director of clinical services at CorrectHealth.

The first step in pursuing NCCHC accreditation is to obtain a copy of the relevant NCCHC Standards and review the facility’s compliance with them. Facilities are expected to comply with all applicable “essential” standards and at least 85% of “important” standards. NCCHC currently publishes five sets of standards: for jails, prisons, juvenile detention and confinement facilities, mental health programs, and opioid treatment programs.

Once preparation is nearly complete, an application is submitted to NCCHC and signed by the person who is legally responsible for the facility. NCCHC then provides a self-survey questionnaire, in which information is provided about the facility and its health services. That information helps both NCCHC and the facility staff assess readiness for the on-site survey.

For Chatham County, preparation for the accreditation survey required a coordinated effort among healthcare staff, frontline healthcare providers, corrections and civilian staff, the county Department of Behavioral Health, NCCHC staff and surveyors, and representatives from CorrectHealth.

“The Chatham County Commission worked with the sheriff to ensure that resources were used wisely and that applicable standards were met or exceeded,” says Freesemann. “This required us to justify the appropriate expenditures and make sure the medical/mental health contract was as efficient as possible. The teamwork between the sheriff’s office, CorrectHealth and
the county commission cannot be emphasized enough. Everyone had to work together in order to meet all of the standards.”

Hatfield admits that this effort was “quite the undertaking,” involving weekly meetings and a color-coded spreadsheet listing each NCCHC standard and compliance indicator. Hatfield’s weekly meetings were attended by Freesemann, Detention Center Commander Brian Counihan, and, from CorrectHealth, President Carlo Musso, MD, Mental Health Director Heather Sims, and Health Services Administrator Karen Forchette, BSN, RN. Each participant performed a valuable role that was instrumental in ensuring everyone understood the NCCHC Mental Health Standards and worked collaboratively.

It was a huge amount of teamwork among the jail, vendor, county, and NCCHC—but Hatfield says it was well worth it. “The entire process provided a lot of opportunity to learn and teach. It revealed ways to improve the program in more ways than we anticipated, from initial screening to referrals to community resources,” she says. “We encountered challenges, but we figured things out.”

On-Site Assessment of Compliance

The next step toward accreditation is having a survey team of correctional health experts assigned to the facility, and setting a mutually-agreed-upon date. There are no surprise visits by NCCHC. Surveys typically last two to three days and involve extensive documentation and health record reviews, tours, and interviews to ensure that medical, dental, and mental healthcare is delivered safely, efficiently and legally. Facility staff receive preliminary feedback and have a chance to ask questions both during the survey and at an exit conference on the last day of the survey.

Chatham County set the health services and mental health services survey dates in the same week. NCCHC coordinated the appropriate team members and conducted the health services survey early in the week, followed by the mental health services survey. Both reports were prepared by NCCHC’s lead surveyor and submitted for review.

Accreditation decisions are delivered after NCCHC’s accreditation and standards committee carefully evaluates the survey report for compliance with the standards. Along with the decision, facilities receive a comprehensive report with recommendations for continued compliance and quality improvement.

The survey cycle is typically every three years. NCCHC staff members provide support throughout the entire process, from pre-application to ongoing compliance. Accreditation is a team effort, not a test.

Improvements Lead to Success

Success for Chatham County came after changes were instituted to prepare for accreditation, including increased mental health staffing (a full-time psychiatrist and additional counselors), enhanced crisis intervention and mental health first-aid training for police and corrections officers, an improved intake screening process, and more.

For some, the idea of treating mental illness like any other chronic or acute health need requires a change in mindset, Freesemann says. But many understand the importance. “Like everyone, we are working with limited resources. But when you take care of mental health, it helps solve other problems too,” he explains. “Security issues and length of stay are reduced. Fewer resources are drained.”

Accreditation signals a constitutionally acceptable level of care for inmates, which translates into improved health status, fewer grievances and lawsuits, and reduced health risk to the community when inmates are released. Chatham County has taken a very proactive step by seeking out accreditation for mental health services. The challenges presented by a large inmate population with mental health needs, ranging from serious mental illness to substance use disorder to unhealed trauma, can be daunting. The Standards for Mental Health Services in Correctional Facilities provides a blueprint for navigating those challenges, and NCCHC accreditation confirms that systems are in place to meet them.

For Freesemann, who recently became a Certified Correctional Health Professional, working through the NCCHC standards was particularly eye-opening. “I’m not a nurse or a doctor, but I now see the importance of the guidance provided in the standards. With the NCCHC standards as our road map, we now have the right resources in the right places.”

Tracey Titus, RN, CCHP-RN, is NCCHC’s Vice President of Accreditation. She has worked in correctional healthcare for over 25 years, primarily as health services administrator for a county jail, where she managed the overall health services operation. She is also a certified instructor for the Indiana Law Enforcement Academy. In her current role, she oversees the accreditation program for nearly 500 facilities as well as the surveyor program, publishes articles and frequently speaks at healthcare and custody conferences nationwide, including keynote presentations. She may be reached at traceytitus@ncchc.org.