

Law Enforcement

Understand Their Perspective

In most communities, a disproportionately large number of calls to law enforcement involve people with mental illness. When responding to these calls, some of the difficulties that officers face include the following:

- >> Few officers receive training about the signs and symptoms of mental illness, local mental health resources, or proper strategies for responding to individuals in crisis.
- >> Traditional law enforcement strategies can confuse and threaten people with mental illness, which can lead to erratic behavior that sometimes results in injury (or worse) to these individuals or officers.
- >> Some officers are aware that many of the individuals with mental illness with whom they come into contact would be best served by treatment, not jail, but the officers may not be aware of, or easily be able to access, appropriate crisis facilities in the community.
- >> Even when crisis facilities are available, lack of coordination between law enforcement and mental health care providers often means that connecting an individual to treatment takes many hours of an officer's time.²³
- >> Calls involving people with mental illness often are prompted by low-level, repeat offenses, which reflect the signs and symptoms of untreated mental illness more than they demonstrate criminal intent.

Specialized and General Responses

Differing policing philosophies impact law enforcement agencies' receptiveness to certain initiatives to improve the response to people with mental illness. Whereas some police agency leaders believe that select officers should be trained to specialize in responding to people in crisis situations, others conform to a generalist approach in which all officers should be prepared to address all types of problems they encounter. Generalist agencies believe developing specialized teams to address certain problems will breed an "it's not my problem" attitude among patrol officers, which can be both dangerous and ineffective. Consequently, initiatives that rely on "teams" may be less appealing to these agencies.

²³ Henry J. Steadman and others, "A specialized Crisis Response Site as a Core Element of Police-Based Diversion Programs," *Psychiatric Services* 52 (2001): 419–422.



Explain Why Addressing the Issue Is in Their Interest

Besides providing better services to people with mental illness and their family members, there are numerous reasons why law enforcement agencies should be interested in improving their response to this population. Below are just four of them:

- >> **Increase public safety**—Time spent responding to low-level public nuisance crimes takes officers away from their core responsibilities of preventing violent crime and promoting homeland security. Likewise, connecting individuals with mental illness to long-term treatment can help prevent future crimes, whether low-level offenses or more serious ones.
- >> **Enhance officer safety**—Training officers to respond properly to people with mental illness has been proven to reduce officer injuries.²⁴
- >> **Improve efficiency**—Partnerships between law enforcement and mental health care providers help officers rapidly connect appropriate individuals to treatment, allowing the officers to return quickly to their patrol. Departments with specialized programs to respond to people with mental illness have also seen sharp drops in their use of SWAT teams.²⁵
- >> **Strengthen community relations**—Improved outcomes for individuals and their families increases community confidence in police, and thus makes every officer's job easier.
- >> **Reduce arrests**—Arresting individuals consumes a good deal of an officer's time. In addition, when arrestees are released back into the community—often within hours—officers can become frustrated about their lack of efficacy.



²⁴ Randolph DuPont and Sam Cochran, "Police Responses to Mental Health Emergencies—Barriers to Change," *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and Law* 28, No. 3 (2000). The rate of injuries to officers during mental illness-related calls fell to .007 per 1,000 incidences in the first three years of the program, from .035 per 1,000 incidences in the three prior years.

²⁵ Ted Gest, "Criminal Justice and the Mentally Ill: New Remedies for a Vexing Problem," unpublished paper, available online at http://www.sas.upenn.edu/jerrylee/programs/fjc/paper_sept02.pdf.



Propose an Initiative

Advocates able to interest potential law enforcement partners in dialogue about these issues should be prepared to discuss concrete strategies with them such as the ones described below.

- >> **Enhanced training**—Training about the signs and symptoms of mental illness, de-escalation techniques, and local mental health resources should be at the heart of any law-enforcement-focused advocacy initiative. This includes training for new recruits, periodic refresher training for the entire force (including dispatchers and other support personnel), and in some cases advanced training for select officers.
- >> **Crisis Intervention Teams (CITs)**—Cadres of specially trained officers who serve as first or second responders, are growing in popularity among police and sheriffs' departments. Developing a CIT, which generally involves 40 hours of training for specialized officers, requires close collaboration with mental health agencies to ensure that officers have treatment facilities to which they can divert appropriate individuals.
- >> **Mental health co-responders**—Another popular specialized law enforcement response to people with mental illness are teams of officers and mental health providers who respond to incidents jointly.

Learn More

For more on the practical aspects of launching a CIT, mental health co-responder unit, or other specialized law enforcement responses, advocates should consult "A Guide to Implementing Police-Based Diversion Programs for People with Mental Illness," by Melissa Reuland; and "Enhancing Success of Police-Based Diversion Programs for People with Mental Illness," by Melissa Reuland and Jason Cheney. Both are available online at <http://www.gainsctr.com/html/>.

