

Police train to encounter mentally ill

Program could mean fewer patients in jails, more time for real criminals

BY MEG MCEVOY

Imagine this scenario: A police officer gets called out to a "domestic," typically a dangerous and volatile situation. On the scene, the officer encounters a "suspect" who's acting distraught, irrational and intimidating his spouse. But, after a few seconds, the officer isn't reaching for the cuffs. He's talking it out with the guy, dissuading him from suicide and even convincing him to voluntarily check himself into a facility.

The above situation has happened, according to UVA Police Sergeant David Webb, thanks to Crisis Intervention Team (CIT), a program that trains police officers to recognize the mentally ill and divert them from the criminal justice system.



Thomas von Hemert, Crisis Intervention Team coordinator for the Charlottesville area, hopes the program's grant will get renewed. CIT teaches police how to recognize mental illness when they encounter suspects.

"It taught me more about mental health issues in five days than I was able to learn over the past 18 years," Webb says.

CIT training is 40 hours long. Officers take classes on mental health awareness, tour different facilities and role-play crisis situations to learn how to recognize symptoms of mental illness.

Webb says he's gotten training on everything from Vietnam veteran post-traumatic stress to schizophrenia. The training should help police deal with the Charlottesville area's 400-500 offenders with mental illness. Currently, 25 percent of local police in all three departments—city, county and UVA—get the training.

Thomas von Hemert, the criminal justice coordinator for CIT, calls it a "front-end approach." "Police are our front-end crisis workers. ...These officers are a safety net," Hemert says.

Mental health advocates hope that this program might fade some of the stigmas of mental illness. "It's reaffirming to policemen that most of the people who are violent are not mentally ill and most of the people who are mentally ill are not violent." says Jenny Oliver, an advocate with the [local branch of Mental Health America](#) who is on the board for CIT.

But, von Hemert says, it's still a pilot program that will need to prove its worth.

This includes showing that CIT gives police more time to deal with criminals and reducing the state's mentally ill jail population, which stands at 3,200 to 3,500 incarcerated people in Virginia, according to the department of corrections.

But will CIT result in police using too soft a touch? Von Hemert says no: "It's not about being social workers. These are new skills."

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