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Mental-Health Intervention Vital

By Deseret Morning News editorial

A police officer never knows what the next call will bring. They rely on their experience and training to address situations as diverse as capturing a bank robber to quelling a domestic disturbance.

Some 370 Utah peace officers now have the added benefit of a 44-hour training course intended to help them better respond to calls involving people with mental illness.

Recently, the Utah affiliate of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill honored police officers from around the state for completing the volunteer training that helps them determine whether they are dealing with a person who has a mental illness and how to respond based on the behaviors exhibited by such individuals. Today, we add our thanks and congratulations to the peace officers from 36 different agencies who have completed this important training in recent years.

Most often, people with mental illnesses run a greater risk of being victimized or hurting themselves than harming others. But there have also been isolated incidents along the Wasatch Front in recent years when people with untreated mental illness have killed and injured others. Those incidents have been the stimulus of positive changes such as the crisis intervention training program, which has given officers more tools to deal with people with mental illnesses.

Another change was the Susan Gall Involuntary Commitment Act, named for the Salt Lake-area schoolteacher who was killed with an ax by her son. The family had tried to have the young man committed for mental-health treatment, but they could not prove he was an "immediate" danger, which was then the legal standard. In 2003, the law was changed to allow a person's mental-health history to be presented in court to force care for someone with a mental illness, even though they may not pose an immediate risk to themselves or others.

Involuntary commitments increased by 48 percent in a year's time under the new law. NAMI officials believe the change has been largely positive, but Valley Mental Health officials say the experience has been a mixed bag. Some clients come to view the agency as an adversary, which can be counterproductive in initiating treatment. The law has increased costs by nearly \$500,000 because the agency has a larger caseload. However, these issues must be weighed against the positive impacts of several hundred people participating in a prescribed treatment plan.

The state's experience with this new law suggests that it is beneficial to the vast majority of mental-health clients who are placed in treatment. But there must be careful scrutiny to ensure such commitments are legally defensible.

Still, any training or legal mechanisms that make it easier for front-line police officers to better address the needs of people with mental illness or families to place mentally ill family members in needed treatment will be a boon to most individuals and the community at large.

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