

Video offers training for dealing with mentally ill

Police officers to learn how to de-escalate situations, seek action other than arrest

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By Jennifer Amato Staff Writer

To better protect mentally ill patients who are involved in situations that require a response by law enforcement officers, a new training video, "The Community I Serve," was debuted in New Jersey at the Crowne Plaza Monroe in Monroe Township on Dec. 16.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness [NAMI], which has a branch in North Brunswick, has advocated for the training of police officers who respond to mental health crises. As a result, New Jersey's Law Enforcement Education Program will include the video, which was produced by Omusha Communications, to present various instructional scenarios, the perspectives of individuals with mental illness, family member input and interviews with first responders.

"The key is training and the key is knowledge and awareness. We have to start with the police because so many times an individual is arrested to get them off the street or because the police don't know what to do with the individual," said Maureen O'Brien, an assistant prosecutor in Union County. "If an officer learns some tips to de-escalate a situation, they may limit the injuries to themselves, to the victim and to the public."

Law enforcement officials said the reason for the additional education is because there is a general misconception that individuals with mental illness are dangerous, when in reality they are usually the victims of crimes rather than the perpetrators. Therefore, there is a need to change the perceptions of law enforcement officers, who are trained to respond to crime situations, so they can better assist the mentally ill during a crisis situation.

Philip Lubitz, the coordinator of the Law Enforcement Education Program, said that as a result of deinstitutionalization, new medications and advances in treatments, individuals with serious mental illness are more often living in communities, and the federal government estimates there are 350,000 such people in New Jersey alone.

He said that with the closing of psychiatric institutions, prisons have replaced hospitals as the principal institutional setting for people dealing with mental illness. He said the Bureau of Justice Statistics indicates that 16 percent of those in state prisons or local jails have a mental illness, and that 7 to 15 percent of the calls to which a police officer responds involve someone with a mental illness.

Therefore, O'Brien, who is the supervisor of a mental health unit in Union County, said that police officers must be made aware of where screening centers are, who they can call and where they can transport mentally ill patients, rather than taking them straight to jail. She said individuals with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and major depression are most at risk.

The work of Thomas Garrity Jr., the chief of police in Collingswood in Camden County, has therefore been critical to this project.

Garrity went to Memphis a few years ago for a Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) program, and Collingswood was chosen as the first town in the state to pilot the program. Since 2007, the police department has worked with the Camden County chapter of NAMI, and 21 of the town's 41 full-time and 15 special police officers have been trained to develop skills such as the de-escalation of a situation, the recognition of mental illness, and the connection to mental health resources.

"The goal is to divert people at the street level to mental health services ... instead of criminalizing behavior," Garrity said.

Although Garrity said officers "don't excuse criminal behavior," he noted that in lieu of a criminal charge for offenses such as minor crimes or disorderly conduct, sometimes the mentally ill need access to resources other than the criminal justice system, where they may not receive the treatment they require.

"The officers become advocates for the mentally ill," Garrity said.

The 23-year police veteran described one situation involving a detective who had just graduated from the CIT course. The detective encountered a man with a 15-inch butcher knife in a public park. Garrity said the man asked police officers to kill him, but the detective was able to calm him down after about 20 minutes, get the knife, put him in a police car without using handcuffs and take him to a crisis center.

"Prior to this training, he probably would've been shot and killed because he was brandishing a weapon," the police chief said, "but [the detective] actually saved this guy's life."

The 20-minute video features such situations, which Garrity said are simulated by retired New York City police officers who spent a weekend over the summer being filmed under his supervision. One scene shows a dispute at a residence, and another shows a jewelry store burglary.

"The video, I think, demonstrates very well that this person is hearing voices, and because it is a video, you can hear the voices this person is responding to in his head," O'Brien said of the jewelry store scene.

Garrity had already premiered the video in Atlanta in November at an international CIT conference, and said it got a "great review." He said the video should soon be available to every police department and police academy.

Another resource is the pamphlet "Finding Our Way," which guides people directly affected by mental illness and their families through the criminal justice system process.

"The marriage of NAMI and law enforcement is such a positive thing because these two worlds interact on a daily basis but never really talk to each other," Garrity said.

For more information about NAMI, visit www.NAMINJ.org.