

Law Enforcement as Partners: Developing Relationships, Clarifying Roles and Mutual Education

Historically, a large part of the police role has been devoted to social service functions. Police officers are often the first to encounter and help persons who are in need of mental health and social services.

Law enforcement officials sometimes complain that the officers are burdened with inappropriate responsibilities for people who have a mental illness and are often criticized by mental health professionals for not understanding mental illness and for mishandling situations involving people who have mental illnesses.

In a study of 309 police officers entitled, [What Do Police Officers Really Want From the Mental Health System?](#), published by the American Psychiatric Association, police officers responded to questions about the kind of help they needed to better serve persons with mental illness. The officers indicated the following needs:

1. Access to information about person's history. Is the person is absent without leave from a hospital, has potential to commit suicide, a history of suicide attempts, any history of violence, medical issues, drug or alcohol use and medications.

This is the very same data mental health or crisis staff need before going into a situation in the community, yet, police are often asked to intervene without this information. Each community will need to come to terms with the issue of confidentiality of patient information versus the need to know so that officers can be more prepared to do their job.

Crisis responders should be aware that there are several situations in which information may be shared **without** a formal information release:

- To assist the police in the course of an ongoing investigation of a felony, discounting that some felonies may be charged at a lower level during the plea bargain process.
- In an emergency situation in which there is danger or risk to the health and safety of the client or others.
- In a situation requiring coordination of treatment between related health care entities to treat the current episode of the illness.

Staff should review their programs' policies in this area. If you share information with police officers in a crisis situation, the officer may not treat the information the same way you would, so it is important to use professional language and give information on a need-to-know basis.

If information about a relationship is not relevant to the crisis, it is not necessary to include it. On the other hand, certain information is treated with privacy and is not broadcast over the police radio.

2. On-site visits from mobile crisis teams to assist police in determining a person's risk of harm to self or others and help determining if a hold is needed. In addition, the officers expressed the need for:

- Education by mental health professionals
 - How to recognize different types of mental illnesses
 - How medications work
 - How to help the individual
 - Community resources

- On-site mobile crisis teams to respond **rapidly** (within 15 minutes) to police requests for assistance
- Information on how to work with group homes, shelters, and family and friends of individuals in mental health crises

The presence of individual who suffer from a severe mental illness in jails and prisons is an increasing concern. The street officer is often rushed to answer the next call and without the above information, may determine that jail is the only option for an offender who also has a mental illness. Assisting officers on the front end may, indeed, decrease the number of persons in jails and prisons who have a mental illness.

The advantages of a partnership between law enforcement and crisis responders go both ways. Law officers are equipped to handle persons who are armed or violent in a manner that a crisis responder could not and should not. Law officers are identified as *peace officers* who can transport a person to a medical or mental health facility to be assessed. On the other hand, crisis responders can often deescalate a mental health crisis to a point where transportation holds are not necessary.

Developing Relationships between Law Enforcement and Crisis Responders

Relationships between crisis responders and law officers develop best when not begun in a stressful situation, such as responding to a crisis call. The crisis response team leader may wish to contact the head of the local law enforcement agency upon the development of the team and regularly thereafter.

Initial meetings should focus on the benefits to both partners and on clarifying roles and expectations. Some teams have developed a formal method of communicating with law officers when responses have involved police and crisis responders. Others meet at regular intervals to review interventions and continue to clarify roles.

Some crisis responder service areas will contain several law enforcement jurisdictions. In this situation, the team may wish to send letters to all of the jurisdictions but focus their face-to-face relationship building on areas with high population density or high likelihood of frequent calls requiring mobile response.

Clarifying Roles

The **lead crisis responder** should:

- Clearly explain the goals and focus of the response program and how this can be of help to law officers such as providing consultation, responding to callers expressing suicidal ideation and education.
- Discuss situations when a crisis responder may need to seek the services of law officers and when law officers may want to involve the crisis response team.

The **crisis responder** should identify the limitations of the services that the team can provide and ask the limitations of the services that law officers can provide.

Clarification of who is in charge when both law officers and crisis responders are at a scene is very important. Usually when both groups are at a site, the crisis responders act as consultants to the law officers with major decisions being made by the law officers' commanding officer. Any confusion about roles and responsibilities should be discussed and cleared up on an ongoing basis as the situations arise.

A system to review cases where the officers or crisis staff has left the scene with concerns about how the situation was handled should be developed early in the relationship. This

may be as simple as a phone call from the crisis program director to the supervising officer, or it may involve a system-wide meeting.

In either case, the goal is not to place blame on anyone at the scene, but to focus on outcomes and address issues around improving the collaboration so that future cases will go more smoothly for all concerned. It is best to assume that everyone was doing his/her job to the best of their abilities, given their understanding and education.

It is useful for crisis response programs and law enforcement to send memos recognizing each others work when things do go well. Include a more formal evaluation tool so that officers and crisis responders can provide on-going feedback about the effectiveness of their collaborative efforts, program evaluation, education and possible funding.

Education Programs for Law Enforcement

Collaborate with a law enforcement supervisor and/or trainer before planning an educational program for officers. Like crisis responders, law officers are required to receive continuing education. The Minnesota Board of Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) Board coordinate a system of licensing for all peace officers in the state.

Any person employed as a peace officer by a Minnesota law enforcement agency must hold a POST Board license. In order to continue this license in the State of Minnesota, peace officers and part-time peace officers must successfully complete 48 hours of continuing education every three years.

The POST board must approve all continuing education for law officers. Crisis responders may wish to make any continuing education session that they offer more attractive to peace officers by making the session POST credit certified. In order to be accepted for POST credit, the classes must:

- Be law enforcement related
- Promote professional peace officer competence and
- Be related to the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to perform peace officer duties.

Education Programs by Law Enforcement for Mental Health and Crisis Providers

Crisis responders can benefit from education by law officers as they have developed a broad knowledge about the laws and services in the community. Crisis responders must be willing to learn from their law enforcement partners' expertise as well as to teach.

Scheduling regular sessions on working with law enforcement not only increases a crisis staff's knowledge base but can further enhance the collaborative relationship.

Suggested topics for these sessions may include:

- 911: How to place calls, what to report and what to expect
- Preserving Evidence at the Scene: If a crime occurs at a residential program or private home, how should evidence be preserved?
- Requesting police welfare checks
- Home visits and safety
- Missing person reports
- Possession of firearms
- Collaborating with the precincts crime prevention specialists
- Transportation Hold
- Duty to Warn
- Continuum of force used by police
- Communicating information to police
- Working with the courts

It is useful for crisis programs to collaborate with law enforcement in development of a booklet for community mental health providers on *Working with Police*. Staff turnover and inability to have all staff attend law enforcement presentations would make such a booklet a valuable staff resource.