



# Shepherd Care®

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*To Care for People Where They Live and Work*

## COMMUNITY Care TOPIC

### **A Public Servant's Response to Mental Illness**

**Facts** - In communities across the U.S. city statistics show that approximately 7 percent of all police contacts involve a person believed to have a mental illness. When you also factor in emotional disturbances, then this statistic increases dramatically. In one study of 331 people with severe mental disorders who were hospitalized, 20 percent reported being arrested or picked up by police at least one time in their lives for a crime sometime in the four months prior to their hospital admission—most commonly for alcohol, drug, or public disorder crimes. ***This statistic is shared by Dispatch, Law Enforcement, EMS, and Fire Departments.*** Because of unemployment and access to community resources, it is projected that the number of people with a mental illness will only increase. The stress of dealing with these situations can be very stressful for all First Responders and Law Enforcement staff.

**Identification** - There is the issue of Law Enforcement and First Responder's understanding of individuals living with mental illness within the communities they serve. The First Responders are usually the first and often the only community resource called on to respond to crisis situations or tasked to manage an incarcerated person that involves dealing with persons with mental illness.

- A family member, friend, or other concerned person calls the police for help during a psychiatric emergency.
- A person with mental illness feels suicidal and calls the police as a cry for help.
- Police officers encounter a person with mental illness behaving inappropriately in public.
- Citizens call the Dispatch and Law Enforcement because they feel threatened by the unusual behavior or the mere presence of a person with mental illness.
- A person with mental illness calls the police for help because of imagined threats.
- A person reacts erratic in a jail setting or unpredictably to a verbal command by an officer.

**Response** - Most people with a mental health diagnosis do not behave violently, but that person may experience an inability to respond or react appropriately to usual modes of dealing with situations.

- Preparation- people with mental health issues can act erratic. Be observant and rely on your training. Approach each situation seriously.
- Expectation- approach each situation fresh. This way when a person does not respond to the usual request or command in a typical way, you should be prepared for more communication or rephrasing your request.
- Peer Support- ask for and be ready to provide assistance from/to your fellow department staff.
- Understand escalation- people with mental health issues may need to be addressed in a calm manner or gently removed to a calm or safe environment.
- Monitor- once a person has been identified as an individual with a mental illness, communication, research, and planning can ensure that the system will be equipped to handle an unpredictable response.
- Understand your department's policies and the relationship that your organization has with the mental health providers in your community.

**Summary** - Recognizing and understanding symptoms is vital when relating to those in the community living with mental illness. In some cases, an individual might misunderstand or be unable to follow the Deputy's orders because of symptoms that might be presenting. It is important to keep the concept of harm in mind when addressing this problem, because there is a tendency to simply define people with mental illness as the problem and getting them out of sight as the solution. In contrast to most First Responder and Law Enforcement problems, however, this is not one that involves wholly voluntary behavior— rather, it involves behavior that medical conditions cause or compound. Consequently, First Responders have to be careful not to blame people with mental illness, but instead focus on behavior that causes harm to self or others.

When a First Responder or Law Enforcement officer is not trained to recognize mental illness, he or she might misinterpret symptoms and respond inappropriately. Lack of understanding can result in the individual facing unnecessary aggression and incarceration. When all Public Service Personnel partners with the mental health community for education, support, and training, they can combat stigma, save lives, and improve the quality of life through respect and understanding.

Introducing your Community Chaplain

**Eric Kieselbach**

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"Seek first to understand, then to be understood."

**Stephen Convey**

"I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."  
**Ephesians 4:1-3**

All Scripture quotations, except otherwise noted, are from the King James Version of the Holy Bible, (Cambridge: Cambridge) 1769. Public Domain

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