

North Alabama cops train to de-escalate mental health crises



Madison County Jail (Paul Gattis/pgattis@al.com)



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While mental health advocates are working with an Alabama lawmaker to require crisis training for law enforcement, some police agencies across the state already are getting educated about mental illness.

The state's chapter of the National Alliance of Mental Illness is working with Rep. Mike Ball, R-Madison, and the Alabama Peace Officer Standards and Training Commission to develop legislation or policy that would require some type of mental health or crisis training for police and deputies.

The training could be similar to a course offered in Huntsville that was attended by nearly 40 officers and deputies this past week.

Law enforcement representing agencies in Madison, Morgan and Limestone counties learned about Alzheimer's Disease, Bipolar and mood disorders, Schizophrenia, PTSD and other mental health issues, including substance abuse. The training, provided by NAMI Alabama and Auburn University at Montgomery, was aimed at improving law enforcement's ability to de-escalate crisis situations, particularly when mental illness is involved.

Morgan County sheriff's deputy David Allen said the training taught him to look for signs and clues that a person might have mental illness.

"One of the biggest issues we deal with in Morgan County is knowing whether a person might have a drug problem or mental illness," Allen said. "You have to respond to people differently depending on what their situation is. I feel more prepared now to communicate with people."

Allen worked in the Morgan County Jail for two years before becoming a deputy about three years ago. At the end of the four-day training program, Allen said he hopes to become more educated on mental health issues.

"When you understand how people with mental illness communicate and see things, it makes you more compassionate," Allen said. "I really think jail staff especially can benefit from this kind of training."

The specifics of Ball's proposed legislation or policy changes haven't yet been determined. A meeting is planned Tuesday with advocates to agree on what the requirements will be for officer training.

"I want to make sure APOST is on board with this," Ball told AL.com. APOST is the commission that certifies police officers in the state.

"This training is so important," Ball said. "It might allow an officer to avoid using force -- especially deadly. Nobody wants to use deadly force, though in some instances you might have to. But, we need our officers trained to de-escalate."

NAMI Alabama is advocating for Crisis Intervention Training, like what was offered in Huntsville.

"A mental health crisis throws the men and women on our police forces into a dangerous situation. These situations can be deadly for both the officers called on to intervene and for our loved ones in crisis," NAMI Alabama said in a statement. "Officers properly trained to deescalate crisis are more likely to walk safely away from these encounters. They help reduce the incarceration rates for people with mental illness. And most important, a well-trained officer will prevent needless death and injury. We want the men and women protecting us to be protected themselves with the best training and preparation possible. We want people living with mental illness brought home to heal with their families, not behind bars or dead because of their illness."

Madison County sheriff's Lt. Donny Shaw called the CIT training "eye-opening."

Shaw and the other officers participated in simulators that gave them an idea of what it's like to hear voices or experience tunnel vision, which are symptoms of some mental illnesses.

"I can be more empathetic and understanding now," Shaw told AL.com. "I don't know exactly what it's like to have mental illness, but I have a better idea now. It was very eye-opening."

Shaw, who attended the FBI's National Academy last year, is the sheriff's office crisis intervention team coordinator.

The training that was offered is part of a larger effort by Madison County officials to address an ongoing crisis that often leaves law enforcement with no choice but to arrest mental health patients, said the sheriff's Chief Deputy Dave Jernigan.



Madison County takes steps to face mental health crisis

The goal, Jernigan said, is to eventually implement a crisis center, where law enforcement could take mentally ill people who don't belong in jail but need help. Jernigan said the center is a vision involving WellStone Behavioral Health and the county commission.

Brian Davis, of WellStone, said the vision for the center is a place where police could bring people who might be mentally ill for treatment by nurses, psychiatrists and other experts.

"If this happens, it would be a third option for law enforcement -- not jail or the emergency room," Davis said. "We are only in the discussion phase right now and looking at cost and other factors."

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