

# Our view: Police must be trained to deal with the mentally ill



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By **AL.com Editorial Board**

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After years of budget cuts, facility closures and shortsighted half-measures, Alabama's mental health services are in dire condition.

With fewer and fewer options for Alabamians struggling with mental illness, our police and sheriff departments have been forced to shoulder the enormous responsibility for being the state's care providers by proxy.

A months-long investigation by Amy Yurkanin, Paul Gattis, Lee Roop, John Sharp and Challen Stephens revealed this is not a burden law enforcement was designed to bear. The continued reliance on law enforcement to act as the primary mental health care provider is unsustainable, and we share the concerns of the state's sheriffs that they are being forced to serve as an imperfect solution to a growing problem.

However, the harsh reality is that while nearly one in 10 police calls involve a person with

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mental illness, our police officers are woefully undertrained and underequipped for these interactions.



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In a perfectly functioning system, mentally ill Alabamians would have access to the treatment they need. But daydreaming of an ideal system does not mitigate the current crisis.

The facts are that people with mental illness are 16 times more likely to be shot by police, according to the Treatment Advocacy Center, and 10 out of 34 people shot and killed by police in Alabama since 2015 have reported mental illness, according to the Washington Post and AL.com.

This is unacceptable and avoidable.

There are evidence-based paths to improvement. The Memphis "Crisis Intervention Team" model has been cited as a best practice since the late-1990s. The intervention model, which involves partnerships among law enforcement, advocates and health care providers, has been adopted in some fashion by 2,700 communities around the country and is used in nearly every state but Alabama.



## In Alabama police shootings, mental illness often a factor

However, in a political reality where it is necessary to convene a special legislative session to provide even basic healthcare to children — and then our legislators have to raid BP oil funds to deliver on that goal — we're cynical about the state's willingness to allocate the needed resource to mental health treatment. Our legislature has proven that its solution for the 64 percent reduction of psychiatric beds is to propose the construction of more prison beds. Our policymakers have made it clear that they're only willing to discuss "mental health" as a vague argument in opposition to gun control, not as a real crisis that needs real solutions.

We could offer you an optimistic vision of an Alabama that properly invests in state-of-the-art mental health care that is accessible to all, but we'd be shouting into the void. Until Alabamians make it clear to their representatives that they value mental health treatment, politicians will happily pass the burden onto law enforcement. And so our best option for the near term is to

properly train our police officers to improve interactions with the mentally ill.

The Alabama chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness offers free 40-hour training sessions on mental illness. As Yurkanin reported, these sessions are currently voluntary and the last training in Birmingham saw only two attendees. Trainings should be mandatory for a portion of each department in the state.



## Alabama jail expanding to handle influx of mentally ill

Today, police officers are trained to respond to non-compliance with force. A broader understanding of mental illness forces officers to develop new ways to address noncompliance. Those instincts could save the lives of mentally ill Alabamians and could also translate to improved relations between the police and their communities.

If the state of Alabama had the moral fortitude to provide for its most disadvantaged communities, we wouldn't be constantly looking for Band-Aid solutions to fix gaping wounds. However, after a month long special session, it's clear that leadership in Montgomery continues to fail its citizens.

Alabamians must continue to demand that the state improve mental health services, but we can't afford to wait. Inexpensive, short term solutions can and should be implemented now.

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