



Mental health "crisis" encouraging officers to get new training

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By Sarah Snyder [CONNECT](#)

JEFFERSON COUNTY - AL - Health care workers say Alabama is in a "mental health crisis." With dwindling mental health providers, fewer doctors, and in-patient beds at hospitals - more patients are finding themselves without care. That's a huge concern for local police departments.

"When a gun is pointed at a police officer, that training is going to kick in," Dr. Elizabeth Gregory, mental health counselor said.

Just a few weeks ago, a Birmingham officer and firefighter went to check on a man with dementia. When they got there, he pulled a gun and the officer shot back killing him - a natural reaction from police, but a heartbreaking case for a man who might not have understood what he was doing.

"What we're finding is that there is an increased number of people in the community who aren't receiving treatment," Gregory said. "When you think about a person who is behaving irradically, they're having an emotional outburst, they're making threats, they're paranoid, they're dillusional, they're manic - high levels of energy, who are people going to call but the police?"

Dr. Elizabeth Gregory who specializes in mental health says this is something the metro will continue seeing. Bryce beds were reduced, Alabama Psychiatric Services - one of the state's biggest providers - closed, and doctors who deal with mental health are leaving because there's no jobs left for them.

"It's not unusual for them to wait three months to get an appointment," Gregory said.

"You never know what's going to happen, if they get a hold of a weapon, they're not taking their meds, they see a policeman, there's no telling what they're thinking or how they see us as a police officer," Detective Michael Mangina, Irondale Police said.

"My concern is making sure our law enforcement officers are safe as well as that person with the mental illness being safe and the public being safe," Gregory said.

She's training for law enforcement - helping them understand not just physically how to respond, but how to react verbally to a patient not in their right mindset. Officers say that training is needed.

"A lot of times we can use our words or our actions to satisfy them and calm them down," Mangina said. "Sometimes unfortunately if they're being violent or armed with a weapon, then we have to handle that accordingly."

Detective Mangina also says it's important for neighbors, family members and friends - who know someone who has a mental disability to help remove weapons from their home and contact that person's police department - helping officers know how to respond if there's an emergency.

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