

Dwindling mental health care resources put strain on first responders



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Published: July 19, 2017, 6:23 pm



(WIAT) — Members of law enforcement across Alabama are calling for better access to mental health care.

“It’s a subject that we’ve talked about many times. It makes me angry,” said Cullman County Sheriff Matt Gentry Tuesday, as he told reporters that a man with a history of mental illness came into a prominent attorney’s home and killed him.

Later Tuesday night, a spokesman for the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office suggested that mental illness may have played a role in a situation that ended with a deputy fatally shooting a man in Clay.

“The number of community health beds in the State of Alabama are not adequate for the amount of patients that we have,” said Lt. Cody Sumners with the Shelby County Sheriff’s Office. “And law enforcement is encountering the mentally ill on a more regular basis.”

Allison Boyd is the Mental Health Coordinator and a legal counsel in Shelby County, who says she often has to tell families that there is no bed space available for their loved one in a state mental health facility.

“We have to tell a family member that we’re going to have to wait until a bed is available, even though their family member is mentally ill and is a danger to themselves or others,” Boyd said. “We give them the instructions that they need to remove any firearms from the house, remove any dangerous instruments from the house... And our instruction, which puts it back on law enforcement, is, ‘Call 911.’”

When first responders show up on one of those calls, they’re often not prepared to deal with the mentally ill.

“If you’re dealing with someone with PTSD, for example, and they’re having a flashback when they were in service in the military,” Boyd explained. “A loud command or something that an officer might normally do, or might be trained to do, or might be doing correctly, may not work with that person.”

The response, Boyd said, can escalate a situation.

That’s why she’s working with Shelby County to train first responders across multiple agencies next week, to identify the signs of mental illness and handle a situation accordingly.

Forensic psychologist Kimberley Ackerson agrees that the training is a good idea. But as she’s watched the availability of mental health dwindle in Alabama over the past 20 years, as state hospitals close and funding gets cut, she said something has to change.

“The trend now, is that correctional facilities are becoming the major mental health centers for the State of Alabama, and the jails and the prisons are woefully ill-prepared to handle this population,” Ackerson said. “We have to get our officials to understand that the jails and the prisons cannot be the mental health centers for people with mental illnesses.”

Ackerson said investing in mental health care on the state level will save both resources and lives.

“If these people are being appropriately treated, they’re going to be more likely to function independently, not being so dependent on other social agencies or other social support, will be able to function in society safely and securely, thus reducing risk for everybody all around,” Ackerson said.

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