

Commission on Quality of Care and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities

Meeting the Need

by Tom Harmon

All law enforcement agencies, from time to time, are called upon to intervene in situations involving persons with emotional difficulties. When not handled properly, such situations at best can be traumatizing for such an individual; at worst, they can be physically dangerous, even fatal, for one or more parties.

As part of their 510 hours of state-mandated basic training, all police officers in New York receive 16 hours of instruction on mental illness and people with disabilities. Not satisfied that this training alone was sufficient to meet the needs of the people it served, in 2003 the Rochester, New York Police Department (RPD) embarked on an initiative to create an Emotionally Disturbed Persons Response Team (EDPRT) and establish a school to serve as the cornerstone of the EDPRT program by training members of the team as well as other members of the Department, and interested public safety officers from other departments and jurisdictions.

The initiative was spearheaded by Dr. Cedric Alexander, a clinical psychologist, who at the time was RPD's Director of Professional Development and is now the RPD Police Chief.

Supplementing the basic training all police officers receive, the EDPRT School offers 80 hours of training, the most extensive curriculum in the nation for law enforcement devoted to this topic. Courses are offered in two 40-hour-week sessions: the EDPRT Basic School and the EDPRT Advanced School.

The curriculum covers issues including, but not limited to, Mental Hygiene Law; signs and symptoms of mental illness and its various manifestations (bi-polar disorder, schizophrenia, etc.); mental illness and chemical abuse; developmental disabilities; medications; the local service delivery system and how to access it; the mental health court; interacting with individuals with emotional difficulties; and special considerations for dealing with juveniles and the elderly.

According to Sgt. Eric Weaver, Commander of the EDPRT and lead instructor for the school, "We didn't want just police teaching police...we don't have all the answers." As such, the vast majority of instructors are clinicians, such as Don Kamin, Ph.D., from the Monroe County Office of Mental Health, who helped shape the program, psychiatrists and other service providers and, most importantly, service recipients and members of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill who share experiences on living with mental illness. As the goal of the school, according to Sgt. Weaver and Dr. Kamin, is to erase stigma, or to "change the heart" of those who interact with people with mental illness, the involvement of service recipients and family members is essential. Another key element of the school is role playing; twelve hours of the program are devoted to honing response and interaction skills in various simulated situations through role play.

Sgt. Weaver and Dr. Kamin noted that individuals with mental illness sometimes come to the attention of law enforcement because they have publicly displayed symptoms of their untreated mental illness. Sometimes this is in the context of a crime being committed and, at other times, when no serious crime has been committed. They pointed to research which has shown that, nationally, large numbers of people have been incarcerated because of untreated mental illness. The EDPRT training initiative is focused on providing law enforcement personnel the skills necessary to identify, interact with and help individuals with mental illness, and to work with the mental hygiene system to provide appropriate treatment for them.

Following completion of the EDPRT School, there are periodic training days when graduates get a chance to process challenging situations they've encountered and receive training on additional topics as they are identified.

The first class of 55 people graduated from the EDPRT School in March 2004 and another 49 graduated in January 2005. Of these 104 graduates, 42 staff the EDPRT. Although assigned to their regular police duties, these team members are redeployed to respond to situations as they arise. The remaining graduates work in various public safety jobs - such as probation, parole, jail settings, etc. - in Rochester and other jurisdictions.

Asked about indicators of the success of the EDPRT and the School, Sgt. Weaver indicated that the team has responded to approximately 400 situations since its creation and, in that the individuals in these situations were met with compassion, dignity and respect, "each response was a success story." Most of the calls responded to by the EDPRT involved individuals who were suicidal or in crisis.