



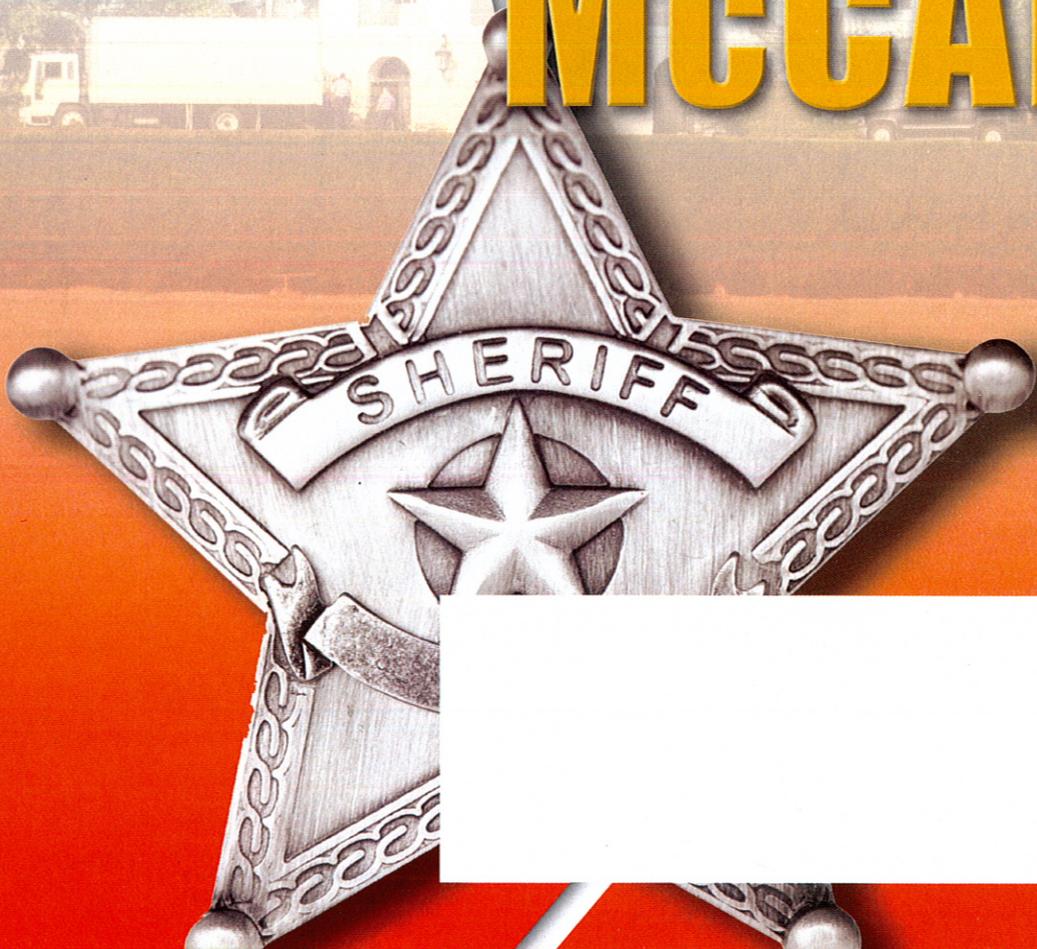
Sheriff

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How Do You Handle **Mentally Ill** Inmates

By Kathleen Carey, PIO
Newport News Sheriff's Office



At 8:16 p.m. May 6, 2008, Corporal Brian Dodge was wheeled into emergency surgery. After the six hour operation, it was still unclear if doctors were able to save his eye.

The potentially career-ending injury happened at the hands of a mentally ill inmate.

It was dinner time that same evening when 22-year old Darrell Ray West, Jr. began acting out. He threw urine soaked toilet paper, feces and food at everyone who walked by. His cell was in a high traffic area of the Newport News City Jail, Newport News, Virginia. His behavior was disruptive and determined to be an immediate threat to the safety, security and sanitation of the jail's lockup. Deputies were instructed to move him to another part of the jail.

Corporal Dodge said he handled cell extractions similar to this throughout his 16 years with the sheriff's office. Nothing new. Nothing different. Or so he thought. Dodge described what happened next. "We first sprayed O.C. hoping to incapacitate him. We didn't get the desired effect. He was still lively. I was first through the gate. I tried to watch both of his hands. He got in one lucky punch."

That one punch shattered the left side of Dodge's face. His eye popped out of its socket. "One thing we have experienced is that people who are mentally instable tend to have a strength that others don't possess," explained Dodge. It took eight deputies to secure Mr. West in the restraint chair.

"What I remember going into surgery was hearing the doctor say they might have to remove my eye. I was scared." Surgeons rebuilt his face using five titanium plates. They reattached his eye, but no one knows if – or when – he will regain sight. "If I cover my good eye, my world is pitch-black."

Asked if he is angry, Dodge replied, "I am not particularly angry with Mr. West. I wish it hadn't turned out like it did. But they (mentally ill) aren't rational. They

aren't in their right mind. Jail is not a suitable place to deal with this type of individual. We don't have the training or the accommodations. Jail is not the place for a person who requires treatment."

Sheriff Gabe Morgan is proud of his deputy for showing such amazing wisdom at a time when others might be resentful. "We will take care of him," said Morgan of Dodge. "He is one of ours, and we are going to make sure we meet his needs during this time of



From cell 7, inmate Darrell West, Jr. threw urine soaked toilet paper into the deputy office across the hall and at everyone who walked by his cell door.



Corporal Brian Dodge lies in a hospital bed awaiting emergency surgery. With one strong punch, a mentally ill inmate broke the deputy's eye socket. His face was reconstructed with five titanium plates. So far, his vision has not returned.

recovery. Our prayers are with him that he completely heals. But Dodge is right. Jail is not a place for the mentally ill.”

Yet, across the country, jails have become asylums for the mentally disturbed. The Los Angeles County Jail, Chicago's Cook County Jail and New York City's Riker's Island each hold more people with mental illness on any given day than any psychiatric facility in the United States.

That finding was published in the 2002 Consensus Project Report written by the Council of State Governments Justice Center, and representatives from leading criminal justice and mental health organizations in an effort to help local, state and federal policymakers improve the response to people with mental illnesses who come into contact with the criminal justice system.

Sheriff Morgan sits on the Supreme Court of the Commonwealth of Virginia Commission on Mental Health Law Reform and is the Chair of the Emergency Detention Order and Temporary Detention Order Subcommittee. A legislative solution is being sought to address the needs of the mentally ill. Morgan said, “As we come into elections, Sheriffs have an obligation to question, inform and to lobby for reform in our jails,” no matter whether they are large, medium or small correctional facilities. If not, the price of handling the mentally ill inmate will become increasingly costly – both in injury and in expense.

The numbers are already staggering.

The Newport News City Jail houses an average of 685 inmates. Nearly 36% of them have mental health issues ranging from mild depression and bipolar disorder to major depression and schizophrenia. A third of the jail's pharmacy budget is spent on psychotropic drugs.

The LA County Jail holds 20,000 inmates and spends about \$10-million per year on psychiatric medication.

The number of prisoners behind bars with severe psychiatric disorders is slightly higher than the population of Richmond, Virginia. How did we come to that conclusion?

Data collected by the U.S. Department of Justice in mid-2005 showed there were 2,186,230 prisoners in local jails, state and federal prisons in the United States. Studies suggest approximately one-tenth suffer from severe mental illness. At any given time 218,000 individuals suffering from mental illness are incarcerated. That is the equivalent population of numerous cities, including Richmond.

Newport News deputy sheriffs and the jail medical staff do their best to care for the mentally ill inmates. They keep a close watch on those who are unstable, but only those who threaten to hurt themselves see a trained mental healthcare provider. Sheriff Morgan is asking that the city approve the salary of a full-time mental health professional for the jail. As it stands, the Community Service Board (CSB) lacks the manpower to do anything other than provide counseling in the case of a suicidal inmate.

Chuck Hall, the director of CSB is frustrated. His hands are virtually tied by the cuts to housing and services. By 2010, Eastern State Hospital will lose 90 beds on top of the 43 that were cut in 2002. Eastern State, located in Williamsburg, Virginia, is the only state-run mental hospital in the region. As that facility shrinks, CSB and private psychiatric hospitals try and make up for the loss... but with no additional funding.

Many of the city's mentally ill end up in jail. Their problems sometimes manifest into criminal activity.



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BJA Bureau of Justice Assistance

Side effects of mental illness can lead to drug and alcohol dependency. Individuals self-medicate their conditions with substances they can buy on the street. Homelessness is another symptom of mental illness. Misdemeanors such as trespassing are often used as reasons for arrest. Less serious charges like disorderly conduct are also used to arrest an ill person when no other charge is available.

It comes as no surprise that many people with mental illness are repeat offenders. Studies reveal that about a quarter of both state prisoners and jail inmates had served three or more prior sentences. Without community based treatment, they return to jail soon after being released.

The cost of treatment is estimated to be half the cost of incarceration.

The industry expression "mercy arrest" was coined from police efforts to protect people with mental illness. Officers take someone into custody because they lack other options. The philosophy appears to be, "at least jail will provide three hots and a cot." Just as the correction's deputy is not trained to treat mental illness, the patrol officer is not trained to recognize mental illness. Law enforcement, therefore, is forced into a pattern of reaction and jails forced to become the surrogate mental hospital.

"Someone is being arrested for being drunk in public," Sheriff Morgan said. "But in reality, he is sick. And I don't have the staff to deal with that."

Newport News is trying to find a solution. It plans to copy the Memphis Model, a program established in 1988 after the shooting death of a seriously mentally ill man in Memphis, Tennessee. It works using a crisis intervention team that responds to the initial scene. Team members receive training to recognize mental illness. The goal is to get the mentally ill suspect into the hands of someone who can help and divert him or her away from jail. The Newport News Sheriff's Office is working collaboratively

with the city police department, juvenile detention and CSB. In February, Newport News received a \$124,000 federal grant for the program.

The program has proved to be successful in Memphis. Nuisance calls are leading to less arrests. Officers are reporting fewer injuries. Family members of someone in a psychiatric crisis appear confident in calling a crisis intervention team.

Could the Memphis Model have helped Darrell West, the inmate now facing the additional charge of malicious bodily injury to a law enforcement officer? His initial charge was simple assault against a family member. Of course, hindsight is 20/20, but it leads one to wonder. Did Mr. West belong in jail to begin with? Was there a more appropriate agency to have responded to a person in crisis?

Corporal Dodge said he is not dwelling on what might have been. Instead he is focused on the future.

As Dodge recounted the event from home, a school bus pulled up outside and off jumped his eight year old son, the youngest of three. Dodge is a single father. His biggest concern is the welfare of his children. The use of his eye is an essential component.

Three ultrasounds in as many weeks, and doctors still do not have a clear vision of the veteran deputy's prognosis. ✪

For more information, contact Lt. Kathleen Carey at 757-926-8747 or 757-813-6139.



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A mentally ill inmate who threatened to kill himself sits in a suicide-proof gown. He has previously been admitted to Eastern State Hospital, the region's only state-run institution for the mentally ill. Eastern State is slated to lose 90 beds by 2010. This man is charged with failing to appear. His original charge was petty larceny.