



DEPUTY AND COURT OFFICER

2010 • VOLUME 2 • NUMBER 2

Law Enforcement for the Rural Deputy

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Officer Safety:

Recognizing Your Special Needs Population

By Lt. Kathleen Carey, PIO,
Newport News Sheriff's Office; Newport News, VA

A teenager began getting hostile in Judge Barry Lodgson's courtroom. Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court can be the most volatile of courtrooms based on the nature of the cases heard. Family matters and those involving children can get people's blood boiling.

On this July day in 2009, it was a 17-year old girl who was angry and whose behavior was erratic. Deputy Matt McGee quickly intervened and got a handle on the situation. McGee calmed the teen without injury to the juvenile, himself, the public or to Judge Lodgson. The judge praised McGee for how he managed to de-escalate the situation.

McGee applied skills developed during his Crisis Intervention Team training (CIT). The Newport News Sheriff's Office is systematically ensuring that its personnel receive CIT training to better address the needs of the mentally ill. Not to say this particular teenage girl was mentally ill, but her behavior was unstable at the time. The skills Deputy McGee learned were an appropriate fit. A major component of crisis intervention is improved communication skills. Those who are CIT certified learn to recognize signs of mental illness and how to approach those persons without creating more conflict.

Officer safety... behind bars, on the streets, or in court... is essential for the efficient operation of any department.

CIT training has been a major component in reducing deputy injury, not only in Newport News, Virginia, but in cities and counties across the country where CIT has been put into practice.

It was originally developed in Memphis, Tennessee in 1988 after a mentally ill man had an encounter with law enforcement that claimed his life. That tragic event gave birth to CIT. Dean Barker with the Hampton-Newport News CSB (Community Services Board) said, "CIT is about giving law enforcement the knowledge and skills to better de-escalate persons suffering from mental illness." Barker has researched national statistics and found a list of benefits. "Not only are citizens getting into treatment through the implementation of this program, but repeated calls for service are down, tactical team call outs have decreased, officer injuries are down, and litigation against law enforcement has declined," Barker continued.

Up until Sheriff Gabe Morgan took office in 2006, the only time CSB counselors were called to the Newport News City Jail were in cases involving threats of suicide. Morgan saw a need to increase the level of partnership with CSB. Together, they were able to secure a grant that funds a full-time case manager and a part-time psychiatrist. Lois Tyler, certified as a substance abuse counselor, has an office on the secured side of the jail. It is conveniently located adjacent to a cell block now dedicated to housing inmates diagnosed with a mental illness. Naturally, classification procedures are followed in determining custody levels. Only after concluding safety and security can be maintained on the block are these individuals housed there.

Tyler keeps a close eye on day-to-day behavior. She looks for changes in mood, irritability, anxiety, social interaction, appetite, etc. This is a sampling of factors that can help anticipate if intervention is imperative.

As a case manager assigned to jail services, Tyler also evaluates the needs of inmates throughout the jail, including booking

and lock-up. It is during this first stop in the incarceration process that staff will discover if the person is a CSB client on the outside. If yes, any break in treatment can be averted. Experts point to the detriment of interruptions to medication regimens. Charles Hall, CSB Executive Director, explained, "It then becomes more expensive to begin that treatment all over again. You must begin with another psychiatric intake. Stabilizing the person's mental health must start again." An unstable person can be a greater threat to their own wellbeing in addition to threatening deputy safety.

Having a case manager and psychiatrist serving the Newport News City Jail is relatively new. It was brought online in 2009. Already, the Sheriff's Office has noted significant changes. "Deputies love the new system," said Tyler. "They call me all the time. Not just to talk with someone with a real mental health issue, but for help in talking someone down for other reasons." The jail is noticeably calmer since the advent of a mental health block. Surprisingly that particular block is quieter than most.

The best case scenario with CIT is to divert people away from jail altogether and direct them toward treatment. And that takes a collaborative approach.

This specialized training is being offered both to sheriff's deputies and police officers in the City of Newport News, and to

juvenile detention personnel. It has also reached across city lines into neighboring jurisdictions. Patrol officers now have a choice between jail or the CIT Receiving Facility brought online in August, 2008. This is where consumers receive a mental evaluation. Because deputies are providing 'round the clock security at the facility, patrol officers can more quickly return to their primary duties on the street.

Not everyone with a mental illness who allegedly commits a crime should be taken to a medical facility. That is certain. The commission of some crimes can only be handled with traditional law enforcement measures like jail. The best approach for the City of Newport News has been to implement CIT on a street level and from within the city jail walls. Results are noticeable. The average daily population at the Newport News City Jail has dropped dramatically since adopting CIT practices. At its peak, the inmate population climbed to over 700 in a building rated to hold 248. Today, numbers are hovering just above 400.

Deputy safety behind bars is at the heart of Crisis Intervention Team training. Extenuating benefits of CIT are having a positive impact on other divisions of the Newport News Sheriff's Office.

CSB's Dean Barker sums it up this way, "It's more than just training. It is the awareness of mental illness that breeds sensitivity and understanding." ★

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