



Mental Health Issues in the Criminal Justice System

Across America and including here in Florida, county jails have become some of the nation's largest mental health facilities. This has occurred in part due to law enforcement officers not recognizing an individual's actions as being caused by mental health crises as opposed to being "criminal conduct." The nature of the interaction between law enforcement and a person experiencing a mental health crisis plays a large role in determining whether the person will be arrested and booked into jail or taken to a mental health facility for evaluation. Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training provides law enforcement officers with training on mental health related topics, de-escalation skills, and how to access community-based services. Research shows that CIT improves officer safety, attitudes toward people with serious mental illness, and increases referrals to mental health services by law enforcement.

Below is a real life example from Pinellas County of how law enforcement interaction with a person experiencing a mental illness can be resolved without a loss of life or charging the person with a crime when handled by a CIT trained deputy.

Deputies respond to a call where they encountered a very intoxicated woman who told them that she hated her life and wanted to kill herself. While assessing the woman for a Baker Act, a deputy asked her why she felt that way and how she planned to kill herself. The woman exclaimed, "This is how," and ran into her house. The deputy pursued the woman but not before she grabbed a steak knife and began slicing her wrist. The woman then charged the deputy with the knife in hand. The deputy drew his gun, shouted that the woman had a weapon and at his own potential peril retreated out of the home instead of shooting the woman. Other deputies were waiting outside their weapons drawn. The woman followed the deputy outside where she refused orders to drop the knife. Deputies used non-lethal force to disarm the woman and take her into custody. While being transported for medical treatment the woman stated repeatedly that the deputies should have shot her in the head and that she attempted to commit suicide by forcing the deputies to shoot her. Had this situation been handled by deputies not CIT trained, it most probably would have resulted in the woman's death or arrest.

The Florida Sheriffs Association seeks \$800,000 in recurring general revenue funding to initiate CIT programs statewide with the goal of 100% CIT participation by sheriff's offices and police departments across Florida. These funds will be used to host and facilitate 40-hour CIT trainings and permit agencies to seek reimbursement for CIT training costs. CIT is both a training program and a collaborative effort that builds community partnerships with mental health service providers, mental health advocates, and law enforcement. This funding will train law enforcement officers to safely assess and identify people in mental health crisis and help connect them with community treatment, and help keep them out of the criminal justice system.

