



NEWS RELEASE

HOWARD COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF POLICE OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

For Release: Oct. 12, 2018

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Howard County police announce expansion of mental health unit during Mental Illness Awareness Week

With an ongoing commitment to addressing mental health challenges in the community, Howard County police are announcing the expansion of the department's mental health unit. The announcement comes as the agency recognizes national Mental Illness Awareness Week to help reduce stigma and provide support.

"Police officers are often the first people to make contact with someone in a mental health crisis," said Police Chief Gary Gardner. "It is critical that we focus our resources and prepare our officers for these encounters to ensure everyone involved is safe, and then track these incidents for follow-up. Our goal is to prevent people who may be in crisis from hurting themselves or someone else, and to refer them to services that can help them move forward."

The department is doubling its mental health unit from its two current full-time employees, an officer and a civilian state-licensed counselor known as the mental health liaison, by adding two additional officer positions. The team addresses issues related to police calls for mental health crises, suicides and suicide attempts, and emergency petitions, in which people are taken by police to the hospital if they pose a risk to themselves or someone else.

When mental health incidents occur, the unit members provide follow-up support for people who have come into contact with police, and their families. They make referrals and ensure appropriate resources are being provided, with the goal of ending the cycle of repeated incidents. They also are helping implement the new state law this month on extreme-risk protective orders (ERPO), which is intended to restrict access to firearms from a person who is deemed to be an immediate danger.

"Throughout the county, we have made it a priority to help those impacted by mental illness," said County Executive Allan H. Kittleman. "This expansion of the police department's mental health unit is just the latest way we are bringing more services and support to this population."

Howard County police officers and dispatchers go through a specialized 40-hour training to be certified members of Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT) to more effectively and safely interact with people with mental health issues. This training is conducted in partnership with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and the local Grassroots Crisis Intervention Center.

In addition, every new recruit officer receives more than 30 hours of training on mental illness in the police academy and veteran officers receive refresher training every three years, including de-escalation techniques, suicide prevention and reducing stigma, among other curricula.

The HCPD offers proactive outreach programs to people at-risk, including its new Resiliency Adventure Project, a rock-climbing program for teens who may benefit from support and coping skills to better handle life's challenges. It also offers the voluntary 911 Flagger program, which allows families to provide officers with valuable information about mental health or other conditions that should be considered in a crisis and the best ways to offer help to the person in-need.

As part of the response to many of these calls, the department partners with Grassroots to have mental health professionals respond with police as part of the county's Mobile Crisis Team (MCT). The usage of these teams has more than doubled in five years, from 431 calls in 2013 to 915 in 2017. Howard County has seen a steady increase in suicides in five years, from 19 in 2013 to 27 in 2017, and averages around 1,200 emergency petitions for people who pose a danger to themselves or someone else each year.

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