

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

We seem to be responding to calls regarding mental health with increased frequency. More and more, we hear from community members who feel law enforcement should not be involved in these situations at all. Those who feel this way may not realize the Orange County Sheriff's Office is much more than a law enforcement agency, and arrest is not the only tool we have at our disposal.

Patrol deputies at a modern sheriff's office certainly do protect the community by investigating crimes, enforcing traffic regulations, and arresting those who have broken the law. However, a deputy's duties are much more comprehensive. We also serve as emergency medical responders, public servants, peace keepers, referral sources, property checkers, overdose reversers, regulatory agents, negotiators, and mediators.

We all know that a mentally ill person often needs treatment more than they need to be arrested. We also know there are not enough mental health beds or services in this country, especially for people of low wealth or those who are under insured. People in mental health crisis sometimes make decisions they would not make if they were well. Sometimes these choices result in criminal offenses, actions that pose grave risks to self or someone else, behaviors that make others uncomfortable in public spaces, or choices that victimize other people.

Frankly, my deputies are called to mental health crises because we are available 24/7/365, we are mobile, and we have a highly efficient dispatch system. Who else has the infrastructure we do? If a mentally ill person knocks on your door, perhaps half-naked, talking about aliens practicing mind-control techniques by beaming proton lasers through the electrical outlets, who else are you going to call? What if your depressed teenager won't come out of his or her room and you realize the handgun you keep in your night table drawer is now missing?

Deputies are not mental health clinicians, but they are trained in de-escalation and crisis intervention techniques, they have the necessary statutory authority to transport subjects to a medical facility, and they are trained in best practices for safely containing violent behavior if needed. At present, we are the professionals most readily available and best suited to step into the service chasm in our mental health system, and we have the best chance of helping someone become a patient, not a defendant.

All that said, we hear our community is asking for something different, something more, something better. So far, however, the conversation seems to be about taking emergency response away from us, without proposing viable solutions for creating an alternative infrastructure and system for appropriately meeting the acute needs of the mentally ill while simultaneously protecting the public.

Therefore, I am creating a Mental Health Response Unit (MHRU) within the Orange County Sheriff's Office to more specifically tailor our service to the needs of people with mental illness who are in crisis. This unit is in the development stage, and we are looking for clinical partners. The deputies staffing the unit will have specialized training in verbal judo, crisis intervention, hostage negotiation, and mental health first aid. Additionally, one of the assigned deputies will be a drug recognition expert, one of a handful across the state trained to recognize not only that a person is under the influence, but also able to identify with great accuracy what drug is responsible for the person's impairment. This knowledge can inform appropriate response.

Deputies assigned to this unit will drive vehicles with subdued graphics and wear uniforms with elements identifying their special focus. MHRU deputies will have rotating schedules, concentrating where possible on Monday, Thursday, and Saturday, the days on which we responded to mental illness emergencies most often in 2020. Among their goals will be serving as resource professionals for community members concerned about the mental health of a loved one. They will also intervene in mental health situations before they develop into criminal ones, and before others become victims. Additionally, they will strive to connect those in need with appropriate mental health treatment resources in Orange County.

Please let me hear from you with your thoughts. As stated above, this is a new initiative I am developing. I hear that people do not want "law enforcement" responding to mental health calls, but until there is another system operating in the breach, the responsibility to respond remains mine. I will not ignore it, but I will definitely try to respond in a manner consistent with the values of this community.