

Police get new tools for intervening in a crisis

Beginning today, a class is required at all academies throughout Texas

By RUTH RENDON Houston Chronicle December 21, 2005

When Houston police officer Therman Canton was called to a southwest Houston home where a man was threatening suicide, he knew he had to remain calm.

A distraught man was on the roof of his two-story house with a rope tied around his neck. The man, who had a drug problem, refused to come down, so Canton, a crisis intervention-trained officer, went to him.

Canton climbed to the roof ' keeping a safe distance ' and after 30 minutes of talking to the man persuaded him to not kill himself and to seek professional help.

That outcome is the goal of a new crisis-intervention training requirement for all incoming police officers. Starting today, all Texas police academies must offer 24 hours of classes in crisis intervention and training about the mental health code.

Before, those seeking peace-officer certification were required to take eight hours of training in dealing with the mentally ill and none in crisis intervention.

Some police departments, such as Houston, already require crisis-intervention training for academy cadets.

"What we're trying to do is help the officers be more alert. Our officers have traditionally been taught to take an authoritative stand and take control of the situation. We're trying to give them some verbal tools for getting control of the situation," said Virginia Ross, administrator for curriculum, training and special programs section with the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education, which oversees police certification.

"There is a part of the population that, when there is a crisis or when they are emotional, they respond differently than your typical criminal," she said. "We're just trying to give the officers more tools to use and more strategy to think about when they are in different situations."

A move is afoot to require all veteran police officers to receive some crisis-intervention training as well.

The new course work for rookie officers is based on classes created by police Officer Frank Webb, who heads the Houston department's crisis-intervention team.

Webb's philosophy is that mentally ill people should be dealt with patiently, and officers should calmly listen and communicate. The goal of the Houston classes is to educate prospective officers and veterans on what mental illness is so that they can understand how to better handle a situation when dealing with a person with mental illness.

Webb credits Patsy Gillham of Cypress for bringing attention to the need for police crisis-intervention training.

Gillham's distraught 38-year-old nephew was shot by three La Porte police officers in 2001 after he charged them with a screwdriver.

Since her nephew's death, Gillham has attended the law enforcement commission meetings across the state urging the crisis-intervention training. Her next goal is to get all veteran officers the same training as the rookies.

The crisis-intervention training, she said, "is an alternative to shooting people. We need to make it safe for the public."

The key to dealing with crises and mentally ill persons is to understand the different illnesses and the side effects from medications, said Webb. Cadets also are taught about the Texas Health and Safety Code, which gives officers the authority to have someone who's mentally ill committed.

The Houston academy training also includes a presentation from a mentally ill person.

Ross said the changes to the police academy's curriculum was not a directive from the state Legislature.

"We just saw the need for this early on. We decided to go ahead and do it," she said. "We're trying to give them (officers) a bigger tool box."

The additional training is welcome news to the Hogg Foundation on Mental Health.

"Any training that will give police officers an opportunity to de-escalate the situation and handle it in a safe and appropriate manner is a benefit not only to a potential offender but to the police officer," said Jeff Patterson, a spokesman for the Hogg Foundation.

The Hogg Foundation, an administrative unit of the University of Texas at Austin that was established by the children of former Texas Gov. James Stephen Hogg, leads an effort to have all Texas police officers trained in crisis intervention.

The foundation, along with Gov. Rick Perry's office, is meeting this month with law enforcement groups and state lawmakers to discuss ways that veteran officers can receive crisis-intervention training.

CRISIS INTERVENTION TRAINING

- Stay calm
- Be patient, avoid crowding the individual
- Maintain eye contact
- When possible, provide a quiet place free of distractions and noise
- Listen
Takes notes as necessary
- Ask open-ended questions
- Double-check information given by restating it
- Use the individual's name
- Give instruction or directives one at a time and allow time for the person to comply

Source: Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education

Mental health training can help

By John Byrne / Post-Tribune staff writer January 10, 2005

Felix Mojica had run-ins with the law.

He got into trouble frequently enough that many East Chicago police knew him, according to his sister, Soraida.

But a young patrol officer who responded early Tuesday to a call by another of Felix's sisters may not have been acquainted with the schizophrenic, epileptic 44-year-old.

Felix was fatally shot, and given his history of mental problems, family members and area mental health advocates wonder if the shooting could have been avoided.

With cuts to state and federal funding for mental health care, area police officials expect to continue devoting much of their energy to dealing with people suffering from mental illnesses.

The Gary Police Department last week unveiled its Crisis Intervention Team, a program designed in accord with local mental health facilities and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, to help officers deal with people who have mental illnesses.

The 23-officer corps received training on identifying mental problems and 'de-escalating' situations so people with mental illnesses can receive treatment rather than incarceration, according to Cmdr. Inez White, who will supervise the unit.

Gary's CIT program is modeled on those in Fort Wayne and Memphis, Tenn., White said.

The East Chicago Police Department has no corresponding program.

But new Chief Angelo Machuca said that in light of Mojica's shooting, he will contact Gary police to see about establishing one.

"I know Mayor (George) Pabey wants the officers to have the best training possible, and we have a mental health facility in the city that we could partner with for this program," Machuca said, referring to Tri-City Mental Health Center.

"Having heard about the Gary program, that is definitely something I think would be beneficial."

In Porter County, Sheriff David Reynolds wondered whether identifying that subjects have mental illnesses is the most difficult problem police face in dealing with the issue.

"To suggest you're going to train officers to better identify that people have mental illnesses, that can't be a bad thing," Reynolds said of the Gary model. "But once you ID it, you've got to deal with it."

Equipping Porter County police with Tasers has helped officers safely incapacitate people with mental illnesses who may be trying to harm officers or themselves, Reynolds said.

Medical care or jail

Kathy Burney, chapter leader of the Gary Metropolitan Chapter of NAMI, said Gary's program will help law enforcement agents and paramedics discern when a suspect needs in-patient medical care rather than jail time.

One provision of the Gary CIT program gives trained officers the authority to route people charged with misdemeanors into a health-care facility rather than the jail, Burney said.

"This is going to make our city safer and healthier by getting people the help they need," she said.

By correctly identifying people who have been charged with crimes as suffering from mental illness, police can unburden the criminal justice system and get the people the help they need.

CIT-trained police have the authority to order people be held for 24 hours in mental health facilities, Cmdr. White said.

Family members and other civilians do not have that power, she said.

That fact has become painfully apparent to Irene Basile.

Basile's son, Anthony Sbalchiero, disappeared last fall after Lake County Circuit Court Judge Lorenzo Arredondo ordered him released from Southlake Center for Mental Health in Merrillville.

Basile petitioned the court to have her son committed, to no avail.

She also routinely pleaded with Crown Point police to help get Sbalchiero off the street prior to his disappearance, but officers told her they could not do anything if he broke no laws.

And if he did break the law, officers would simply arrest Anthony and take him to jail, Basile said.

"Jail is not where people with mental issues need to be," she said.

After disappearing from Crown Point in August, he showed up in California in September and was jailed for shoplifting. He was ordered to pay a fine, was released and is missing again.

No long-term solution

While inmates receive mental screenings in the Lake County Jail, the criminal justice system is not geared to providing long-term care, according to attorney Noah Holcomb.

Holcomb was Mojica's public defender in a 1998 case, in which the man was charged with biting a nurse at St. Catherine Hospital.

Mojica eventually entered a plea of guilty but mentally ill to a charge of criminal recklessness. He was given credit for a year behind bars, and set free, Holcomb recalled.

"There was no probation involved, so there was no follow-up," Holcomb said. "Unless he gets picked up on a new crime, he will have no further contact with the system once he gets out."

Soraida Mojica said Felix was on medication for schizophrenia and epilepsy. He sometimes saw a doctor at Tri-City, but sometimes he wouldn't go for his appointment, she said.

Though investigators have remained tight-lipped about what transpired prior to Mojica's death, Burney is convinced correct training could have saved his life....