

Medical News

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Often, when police are called out to respond to someone in a mental health crisis, it's someone who has been in crisis a number of times.

Frequently it is those not receiving the kind of help that allows them stability and the ability to function without harming themselves or others.

The Lake Mary Police Department has backed a proactive approach, and has recently launched a program believed to be the first of its kind in the country that uses a public/private partnership to truly reimagine how law enforcement officers help people suffering from mental illness.

The Mental Health Intervention Group developed as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization has tremendous grassroots support from local healthcare systems, businesses, faith-based organizations, and other non-profit groups. The MHIG is designed to provide a broad range of mental health services while striving to prevent avoidable tragedies, ultimately reducing police interactions and minimizing emergency room traffic.

"The MHIG gives officers in the field resources they would not have even imagined a year ago," said Zach Hudson, public information officer, Lake Mary Florida Police Department and president of MHIG. "By providing professional mental health counselors, medications, and ancillary services at the individual's residence, we strive to break down barriers by providing treatment to those in need of mental health and social services."

The intended goals of the program are to:

- Decrease repeated law enforcement facilitated Baker Acts, a Florida law that enables families and loved ones to provide emergency mental health services and temporary detention for people who are impaired because of their mental illness and who are unable to determine their needs for treatment;
- Decrease first-time law enforcement facilitated Baker Acts;
- Increase access to community resources for the vulnerable;
- Improve stability for the vulnerable;
- Reduce time spent by law enforcement on those with mental health issues.

Hudson said when you're doing something that nobody else is doing, it has its own interesting set of challenges, but begins with taking a holistic view of addressing community needs.

"It's been a tremendous journey. It's not just about a provider coming out," Hudson said. "It's about barriers of care. When we respond to a call for service for someone suffering from mental illness, more than likely we have

seen that person before – possibly numerous times. *And every time we see them, the chances increase that something tragic is going to happen,*" he said.

Lake Mary is a city of only 17,000 yet sees multiple hospitalizations for people with suicidal ideation every month and the police field psych calls in various forms on a daily basis. Hudson said it has become apparent that what is needed is a continuum of care. It isn't enough for people to be sent to the hospital and be saved. If they can't go see their psychiatrist, can't afford their medications or don't have a car to get their medications, what happens?

The police department is working in concert with the Counseling Resource Services (CRS), a community-based, in-home integrated behavioral health agency serving the aged and disabled population in Central Florida. April Boykin, LCSW, co-founder of CRS, said it is exciting to see Lake Mary becoming a leader in this area.

"Lake Mary has identified that their law enforcement officers respond a lot to cases that are not criminal and legal, but rather it's a mental health or social determinant issue that's putting somebody in crisis," Boykin said. "We've identified two populations that can be helped. The first is those in a mental health crisis and who need to be Baker Acted. The goal is, once they're Baker Acted, we see them on the outside and we help figure out what's causing it. Is it lack of access to consistent medication? Is it substance use? Is it having some social determinant that is creating this ongoing crisis?"

There is another population that is not Baker Actable.

They're not intending to harm themselves or anybody else, and they are not delusional. But they're so stressed out that they need additional support."

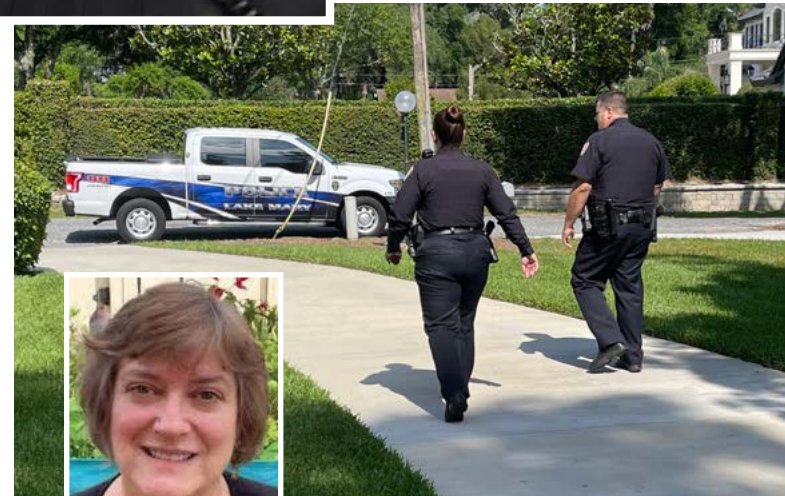
For those people, Boykin said they find out what the person needs whether it is counseling, or access to community resources like a medication that can be delivered because they can't drive, food, or something else.

"Florida is on the low end of providing social support, and many workers are low wage," she said. "People making minimum wage can't even afford an apartment. They're always going to be in crisis. So, when it comes down to, 'Do I get my baby's medication, or do I pay my rent?' it's always going to be a crisis. Since Florida doesn't have adequate supports in place, there's really nowhere for them to turn."

CRS's role is working with other partners to resolve issues. They recognize they won't be able to address every issue, but have a goal of overcoming those multiple calls



Zach Hudson



April Boykin

that are so difficult for law enforcement and the individuals involved.

"It's really unnecessary and keeps them from doing the work that they need to do," Boykin said. "What we expect to see is that we will cut down on the recidivism from these calls."

Boykin said better outcomes for people with mental health challenges help build good will, create a sense of a community that cares, and reduce homelessness.

CRS will bill insurance when possible but is absorbing the initial cost for the 90-day trial period. CRS doesn't serve children but will refer people to another agency if a child is involved.

"We'll still contact the family and work through any resources that they need," she said. "And then, eventually, it will depend on how large this gets, there may be other providers to join the partnership to meet the need."

For more information, Hudson can be reached at 352-250-6444 or zhudson@lakemaryfl.com.