Online Mental Illness Training for Law Enforcement: Easy Access to a Difficult Topic

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More and more frequently peace officers are encountering mentally ill suspects in their daily work. And more and more frequently, those who have not been able to take advantage of mental illness training opportunities find themselves potentially ill prepared to deal with the crises that may arise when encountering mentally ill individuals. Recent statistics suggest that approximately 20 percent of adult Americans experience some type of mental disorder every year, and five percent have a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia, major depression, or bipolar disorder. De-institutionalization has forced many mentally ill individuals onto the streets; approximately 25 percent of homeless people suffer from serious mental illness. It should come as no surprise, then, that several studies estimate most law enforcement personnel will encounter mentally ill individuals at some point in their careers, and many will have multiple encounters with mentally ill individuals each month.

That being said, mental illness training for law enforcement has never been more necessary, yet it is still relatively unavailable and often inaccessible for many in the profession. Crisis Intervention Training (CIT), while valuable, can be costly and time consuming and smaller departments may not have sufficient manpower to be able to afford to send officers for a week of instruction. Yet not providing any education or training for officers puts the officers, the suspects and the public at risk when they come upon an individual suffering from mental illness.

There is now another option for Minnesota agencies seeking more cost effective and easily accessible mental illness training for their officers. In 2009, the School of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice at Metropolitan State University, with a grant from The Wase Foundation and Otto Bremer Foundation and in partnership with the Barbara Schneider Foundation, created an online curriculum on mental illness originally designed for Minnesota jails. The program was made available to the jails during a pilot project in early 2010, from which the feedback was overwhelmingly positive. In 2011, at the request of the Columbia Heights Police Department, we revised the curriculum to target mental illness education to law enforcement rather than jail staff. Keeping the same sub-topics, we rewrote many of the existing modules to fit situations typically encountered by officers on the street, rather than those working in the jails. In short, Minnesota peace officers may now be able to gain some working knowledge of mental illness and relevant issues without having to leave their agencies for long periods of time.

The program is currently part of an overall training effort spearheaded by the Columbia Heights Police Department, in partnership with the School of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice and made available to all peace officers in Anoka County. Anoka County law enforcement officers who attended a one-day training between February and April were required to first complete the online modules in preparation for their attendance. We worked closely with the Barbara Schneider Foundation, who ran the one-day training sessions, to ensure that the online modules directly reflected what was covered when the officers come to the in-person class. However, the modules also can stand on their own as a valuable training tool.

The modules in the curriculum cover myths and facts about mental illness in general, information about specific mental disorders, techniques for identifying a mental health crisis, communication skills, legal and liability issues, cultural awareness and suicide prevention (including a section on “suicide by cop”). The modules include text, visual aids, take-away documents and video clips. The video clips are both re-enactments of scenarios involving mentally ill individuals and peace officers, as well as interviews with a variety of individuals, from a mental health advocate who has been arrested numerous times for his own mental health issues, to a University of Minnesota psychiatrist, to individuals representing the Hmong, Latino and Somali communities who describe their cultures’ conceptualizations and philosophies of mental illness.

All the videos are placed at strategic points in the online modules to illustrate specific concepts being covered.

The scenario re-enactments are perhaps the most memorable parts of the curriculum. The School of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice partnered with the Barbara Schneider Foundation to provide actors who portrayed mentally ill individuals and the officers who interacted with them were current Anoka County peace officers. The scenarios were
unscripted and improvised, with officers responding to the "mentally ill" actors just as they would if they encountered them in a real life situation. When officers attend the in-person training, they re-enact similar scenarios to what they saw in the videos, in order to gain “hands-on” experience practicing what they have learned.

The curriculum, which can take anywhere from four to ten hours to complete, begins with a comprehensive pre-test to determine the knowledge level of users before they begin the modules. At the end of each module is a short post-test, which includes some questions from the pre-test as well as some additional questions, in order for users to test their understanding of specific concepts as they progress through the curriculum. In the pilot study of Minnesota jails, 87 percent of the questions answered incorrectly on the pre-test were answered correctly on the post-tests, indicating that those completing the modules had significantly increased their level of knowledge surrounding mental health issues. The modules are designed so that users can fit them into their schedule, as they can begin a module but return to it later if they do not have the time to complete it. In other words, the time to complete the modules can be spread over days, weeks, or even longer if necessary. This fits well with officers’ schedules, allowing them to complete the modules without any disruption to their sleeping patterns.

According to Ginny Lane, Dean of the School of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice, “The mental health project has been a great example of successful collaboration between private and non-profit organizations, law enforcement, social services and higher education. Law enforcement personnel work on a daily basis with individuals who are in crisis or need of mental health services. Their knowledge and skills in dealing with these situations often determine the type of service provided and influence whether individuals remain in the criminal justice system or are diverted to the health care system. We are delighted to work in partnership with others to help students and practitioners acquire the requisite knowledge and skills for addressing these issues in their work.”

The School of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice at Metropolitan State University continues to be committed to providing training to law enforcement in this critically important area. Toward that end, we plan to develop strategies to make this online curriculum available for additional law enforcement continuing education opportunities following evaluation by those attending the Anoka County training event. If you or your department is interested in learning more about the curriculum, please call Dr. Deborah Eckberg at 763-657-3758 or email deborah.eckberg@metrostate.edu for more information.