

# 2009 IACP National Policy Summit **HIGHLIGHTS**

## **Building Safer Communities: Improving Police Response to Persons with Mental Illness**

### **Planning the Summit**

While serving as President of the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP, 2007-2008) and Director of Public Safety for the City of Sherwood, Oregon, Ronald Ruecker (currently an Assistant Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigations) urged the IACP to convene a process to develop recommendations for enhancing police response to persons with mental illness. His Presidential Initiative centered on the goal of reducing law enforcement officer and citizen injury or trauma during police response to incidents involving persons with mental illness. He also emphasized the importance of addressing issues in a way that joins the voices of law enforcement with those of mental health professionals, family members, children and youth advocates, and consumers of mental health services, to devise strategies that will improve outcomes for all.

In September 2007 the IACP, in collaboration with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), held an initial roundtable discussion hosted by the U.S. Capitol Police in Washington, DC. The roundtable participants included law enforcement officers and executives, family and youth representatives, and partners from the National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health (National Federation). The primary purpose of the roundtable was to gain the insights of children and youth with mental illness and their families regarding law enforcement response to crisis calls for service. The results of that roundtable, and of a subsequent panel at the National Federation's annual conference, were clear: family members and advocates all concurred that, while they sometimes must call the police to intervene when a family situation results in violence, their experiences with police intervention have often been frustrating and unsatisfying.

Every day across the country there are many calls for law enforcement to respond to persons in crisis. Representatives from law enforcement at the roundtable indicated that officers want to be prepared to intervene in crisis situations in ways that result in a safer family and community. Officers need training and tools to safely help a person in emotional crisis, and those around them, regain their balance. They also need increased community involvement and investment in a continuum of prevention and treatment options that will enable them to facilitate positive outcomes in these high-risk situations.



**BJA**  
Bureau of Justice Assistance  
U.S. Department of Justice

## Summit Design and Process

Based largely on past President Ruecker's Presidential Initiative and the concerns raised during the roundtable, the IACP selected "Police Response to Persons with Mental Illness" as the focus for its May 2009 National Policy Summit, the most recent in a series of annual summits that have identified and addressed vital community and law enforcement issues since 1993. The Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), SAMHSA, the JEHT Foundation, the National Federation, and the National Coalition of Mental Health Consumer/Survivor Organizations (NCMHCSO) partnered with the IACP to design and sponsor the summit.

### Summit Goal

Make recommendations that will improve the safety of community members and law enforcement officers when responding to crisis calls involving a person with mental illness. These recommendations are intended to reduce trauma, injury, or death during mental health crisis calls and to promote dialogue among law enforcement, community providers, and partners.

The Advisory Group designing the summit recognized that law enforcement policies and priorities have an impact beyond those persons with mental illness to whom they respond as a result of crisis calls for service. In particular:

- Law enforcement interventions can have very different impacts on children and youth with mental, emotional, or behavioral issues in comparison to those experienced by adults with mental illness.
- Law enforcement officers responding to crisis calls for service may interact with the family members of the person in crisis who have their own perspectives, resources, and needs.
- Law enforcement executives can influence and provide input to a broad range of public policy and resource allocation decisions relevant to community mental health systems and services.
- In addition to responding to individuals in emotional crisis, law enforcement officers may encounter persons with mental illness who are under justice system supervision or those who are reentering community life after a period of incarceration or residential mental health treatment.

The scope of the summit was expanded beyond the initial IACP Presidential Initiative's focus on law enforcement response to people with mental illness in crisis. The expanded scope included other ways in which law enforcement leaders and their sworn and civilian staff can enhance communities' responsiveness to persons with mental illness and persons in emotional crisis.

The IACP invited over 100 leaders from across the country to share their knowledge and views on these complex issues. Participants included law enforcement executives and officers, community and family members, consumers/survivors of mental health services, mental health practitioners, representatives of courts and corrections agencies, and researchers. All came as equals to the discussion and collaborated to create an action agenda of collaborative solutions to the challenges confronting families, communities, law enforcement and the justice system, and the systems of care responsible for supporting people with mental illness and people in emotional crisis.

The summit began with a keynote address that identified shared issues and promising trends, followed by a plenary panel with members who presented the perspectives of youth, consumers/survivors, family members of persons with mental illness, advocacy organizations, courts, corrections, and law enforcement. Summit participants then gathered in working groups that focused on critical issues facing law enforcement and its community partners. Areas of concern addressed by the groups were:

1. Crisis Intervention/First Responders
2. Cross Systems Collaboration
3. Legislation and Policy
4. Reentry into the Community
5. Youth

Each working group included a cross-section of participants from various constituencies. The groups were asked to discuss challenges and identify opportunities for collaborative solutions to these concerns. The working groups developed recommended strategies that can help agencies, organizations, communities, families, and individuals address shared problems and build safer communities.

## Summit Results

The final summit report, to be published early in 2010, will summarize participants' recommendations about the roles that law enforcement leaders, officers, and dispatchers can play in improving responses to persons in crisis. It will also outline recommended legislative, policy development, and other collaborative initiatives that will support law enforcement agencies working to enhance their responses to persons with mental illness and in emotional crisis.

The recommendations for change developed by each of the summit working groups will lay the foundation for:

- The contributions law enforcement leaders can make to developing policies, protocols, and strategies to enhance their agencies' responses to persons with mental illness.
- How law enforcement officers can best prepare to de-escalate crisis situations to which they are called to avoid injury and trauma.
- How consumers of mental health services, their families, and advocates, should be engaged in planning, delivering, and monitoring the impacts of crisis intervention training for officers and other crisis responders.

- Determining which partners should work with local law enforcement agencies to decriminalize responses to persons with mental illness and the strategies these local collaboratives can employ.
- Approaches that have proven to be effective alternatives to arrest for persons with mental illness apprehended for minor offenses.
- How school resource officers can be involved in supporting children and youth with mental, emotional, or behavioral issues.
- The unique characteristics of children and youth with mental, emotional, or behavioral issues that should be taken into account in developing effective prevention and crisis intervention approaches that will minimize trauma and stigma for these children and their families.
- The roles law enforcement leaders and officers play in the reentry process for jail and prison inmates with mental illness who are returning to their communities.
- Legislative, funding, and technical assistance initiatives at the national and state levels that should be developed to support law enforcement agencies and their partners in enhancing responses to persons with mental illness.
- How the IACP can work with its national and local partners to advance the training, policy development, and action research initiatives necessary to enhance police response to people in emotional crisis and persons with mental illness.

The final report will offer specific strategies and approaches that can serve as a guide for law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and all of their community partners in their continuing work to improve police response to persons with mental illness at the state, local, tribal, and federal levels. The recommendations are intended to serve as a catalyst, opening dialogue and strengthening collaboration among all those with a stake in the success of this endeavor – law enforcement, community residents, consumers and their families, advocacy groups, and the mental health and justice systems.

The overarching objective of the summit and the summit report recommendations is to increase the safety of persons with mental illness, their family members, and the officers who respond to crisis calls.

*This project was supported by Grant No. 2008-DD-BX-0277 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.*