Inside Alabama's mental health hotlines: 'We are the air traffic controllers'

A team of specialists manage the phones at the CarePointe call center. Each day, the specialists handle calls at the Mobile, Ala.-based center, some which can become life or death situations (photo supplied by AltaPointe Health Systems).

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LaQuanda Wingate is thrust into the front lines of mental health whenever she picks up the phone and introduces herself to the person on the other end.

That person can be armed with a gun and in mental health crisis. The difference between life and death could be the outcome of the conversation with Wingate. It's a high-stakes job that bring about its fair amount of stress, but Wingate handles the calls in a calm and disciplined manner.

"It's more intense when you know they have access and the means (to commit harm) and the thoughts to do so ... it's a situation that makes you feel stress. But it's also pleasing to help," said Wingate, one of eight full-time specialists employed at CarePointe, a 24-hour phone line that serves as the beginning point for mental health services for AltaPointe in coastal Alabama.

Wingate recalls one especially stressful call.

FRONT LINE ON MENTAL HEALTH

A man sitting in a parked vehicle at one of AltaPointe's program centers in Mobile was armed with a gun, threatening to commit suicide. Wingate calmed him, while another one of her team members at CarePointe dialed 911. The authorities arrived, disarmed the man and prevented him from harming himself or others.

"It was an amazing circle of communication all to keep this person safe," said Ingrid Hartman, Wingate's boss and assistant director of CarePointe. "We were staying on the phone with the dispatcher as she was on the phone with a (police officer). We would tell (the dispatcher) what this person was saying and she'd relay that back to the (officer). It was a horrible situation, but that person was able to get the help they needed."

Not all of Wingate's calls are as dicey as an armed caller. Some can be downright mundane such as scheduling hospital admissions or handling inquiries from healthcare providers about services in the area.

But no one day – and no one call – is the same. The ambiguity from one caller to the next, and the potential for a caller to be on the verge of a mental breakdown, keeps the CarePointe specialists attentive and together.

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Hartman stands ready to assist. On one particular Monday morning, shortly after the start of the school year, she was monitoring one of her specialists who was handling a call from a distraught mother who wanted hospitalization for her son. A specialist handling the call sent Hartman an Instant Message with the details.

"She'll keep me clued in," said Hartman, who has headed up the team for the past five years while seeing its growth even as mental health budgets statewide have shriveled.

The increase, which includes staff and budgeting, coincides with AltaPointe's growth in coastal Alabama and beyond. In the past two years, that includes **incorporating all of Baldwin County's mental health services** as well **as the recent merger with a mental health center that services Clay, Coosa, Randolph and Talladega counties.**

AltaPointe has long managed mental health care services in Mobile and Washington counties. It's among the few providers that has two hospitals: One for adults (EastPointe in Daphne) and one for children (BayPointe in Mobile).

CarePointe has grown since its finding as AltaPointe's access-to-care in 1998 with a staff of three and a budget of around $120,000. Today, the budget is around $734,000 annually and the staff includes the eight specialists, nine after-hours staff members, two employees who assist with hospital admissions and three staff members assigned with post-hospital care.

Tuerk Schlesinger, AltaPointe's CEO, said while other mental health care providers in Alabama offer crisis help hotlines, his program is unique in that "everything is funneled" through CarePointe including outpatient services and residential placement requests.

"We are the air traffic controllers for the system and over the last five years, we've become more (involved) with overseeing the direction of the consumers into ... and out of the system," said Hartman, acknowledging that the 2012 closure of Searcy Hospital in Mt. Vernon along with the mergers has led to the surge in activity.

The increased reliance on CarePointe comes at a time when Alabama struggles with housing people with mental illness, and more and more often the policy say they are having to arrest the mentally ill. In a months-long investigation, **AL.com** obtained responses from 40 of 67 sheriff departments statewide with 70 percent saying that they were holding someone for mental health treatment. Another 65 percent said they have had trouble getting help for a mentally ill inmate in the past year.

Alabama's mental health crisis: 'It falls back on jails'

'Business strategy'

At CarePointe, immediacy matters. The organization wants to maintain a 90 percent answer rate to all calls made into CarePointe, and a large digital board within CarePoint's main office shows how long callers have been on hold or are waiting assistance: "The worst thing you can do is to be on hold for an extraordinary amount of time," Harman said.

If the answer rate dips, more personnel will be added to CarePointe.

On average, CarePoint's specialists are handling 3,500 calls per month. Not all, or even a majority, would be considered an emergency crisis. But the call volume is up considerably: The weekend and night calls in August were up 68 percent in August compared to the same month four years ago.

Alabama jail expanding to handle influx of mentally ill

Budgetary pressures, which are a regular concern for anyone leading a mental health service in Alabama, could alter CarePointe's influence in AltaPointe's services.

Schlesinger said he doesn't anticipate change.

"I don't think it's a budgetary thing for us ... it's a business strategy," he said. "I don't think that this is a common practice in our industry."

But if tougher times emerged, he said: "I don't want to (touch CarePointe). But they aren't direct care providers. It's (around) $800,000, that we could save by having people call the front desk of their locations and sign up for appointments right there. But it's just not effective. You get the wrong people with the wrong provider or the provider is not an expertise in that particular area."

Instead, he anticipates adding more duties to CarePointe's list of responsibilities. Among them could be the addition of a psychiatrist to the staff who would be assigned to manage telemedicine inquiries.

Meanwhile, Hartman's staff will work on handling the influx of calls as needed.

And her staff will be required to multi-task a job that carries with it a host of stresses.

"All of the folks I have ever worked with here are very compassionate," she said. "They have to be able to ask questions ... have special customer service skills. We would never tell people to 'calm down.' That's pretty patronizing. You want someone with good coping skills that do not take the calls personally."

In those cases where the calls are highly stressful – such as the case involving an armed man with suicidal thoughts – the team of specialists will come together and offer support.

"We'll send out an IM saying that so-and-so just saved a life," Ingrid said. "Most people don't go home at the end of the day

knowing they just saved someone's life. That's pretty amazing."

In Alabama police shootings, mental illness often a factor

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