

Local police training on mental health varies

By Ashley Remkus Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, July 12, 2015 12:15 am

The training local police officers receive for dealing with mental health patients varies by agency, but there's one thing they all agree on: Dealing with the mentally ill happens nearly every day.

Police officers throughout the state are required to complete mental health training to receive certification from the Alabama Peace Officers Standards and Training Commission, but any further training depends on departmental policy, officials said.

“There are four hours during basic training that are under the title of handling the emotionally disturbed,” said Louis Zook, the state training commission's chief of staff. “That's specific to individuals who may be emotionally disturbed or mentally ill or have those things going on in their lives, whether they are temporary or ongoing.”

Lawrence County Sheriff's Office investigator Steven Moody came face to face with a mentally ill person in March. Moody had to use deadly force after Shane Watkins came at him with a box cutter, according to witnesses. Moody said firing his weapon and killing Watkins was unavoidable, a Lawrence County grand jury ruled June 29.

Moody said in his statement to the Alabama Bureau of Investigations that he tried to defuse the situation by telling Watkins he had left his gun in his vehicle. It's not known how many hours of training he and other Lawrence County deputies undergo in dealing with mentally ill patients because Sheriff Gene Mitchell did not respond to phone calls last week.

Policies vary elsewhere in north Alabama.

In Hartselle, Police Chief Ron Puckett said because his officers are required to graduate from the state police academy, they receive training on how to deal with the mentally ill, but the department does not require ongoing training.

“I'm sure we're dealing with the mentally ill every day,” Puckett said. “But regardless of the situation, our policy is to de-escalate. If the suspect is determined to have some kind of mental illness, we call in mental health professionals. We try to reason and keep everybody calm until the proper professionals are on the scene.”

Zook said that policy falls in with the state's training curriculum.

“It creates recognition and awareness among the officers when dealing with the mentally ill,” he said.



Hartselle Police Chief Ron Puckett

“It’s clearly important for an officer to realize people sometimes don’t follow directions because sometimes they don’t understand. How (officers) may need to respond to that individual is different than they would in some other situation. If that is the case, they learn what steps are taken to protect them and the general public and what steps are taken to get the treatment they need.”

Decatur police spokesman Lt. John Crouch said DPD requires officers to complete eight additional hours of training in dealing with mental health patients. The curriculum covers autism, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and a variety of other illnesses, he said.

“Generally we don’t get called unless someone is causing a disturbance,” Crouch said. “It literally has to get to a point where someone is causing a danger to themselves or others. Our training is to tell if a person has mental problems. And after we recognize the situation, we know how to respond.”

He said once officers identify a person may have mental illness, their training helps them understand how to talk to the person and de-escalate the situation.

“For example, if a person has autism, loud verbal commands and bright lights — like the ones on our cars — can further agitate them,” he said. “Even our shiny badges can make the situation worse. So, our officers try to do everything they can to keep the situation calm.”

Three years ago, a Decatur police officer had a tragic encounter with a man with a history of mental illness. Mister Bobby Lowe, 36, was shot and killed after attempting to take the officer’s rifle. Police said the lone officer armed himself with a rifle as he acted on knowledge that Lowe was bipolar and 911 calls indicating he had a gun and was threatening his girlfriend.

It turned out Lowe did not have a gun. According to police and witnesses, Lowe charged the officer and tried to wrest away his rifle. During the struggle, the officer drew his pistol and shot Lowe twice in the torso, killing him.

Police had encountered Lowe in the past and were aware he had a mental illness, Crouch said following the August 2012 incident.

Local law enforcement officials said they’re aware of the complexities such situations present and try to have their officers prepared.

Steven Young, spokesman for the Limestone County Sheriff’s Office, said deputies are not required by policy to complete mental health training outside of the state’s requirement for certification.

“We try to offer it when we can,” Young said. “And when we do, we require patrol officers to go. We actually had a training not too long ago. It went a lot into what we can’t do.

“We’re not diagnosing anything. It’s more or less trying to give our officers an understanding not every case can be treated the same.”

Young said it’s also important to remember that even if all law enforcement agencies received the same number of hours in mental health training, the curriculum would likely differ.

Athens police Chief Floyd Johnson said each department has to find what works best for its needs.

Johnson said his officers complete 40 hours of training per year, and while there is not a specific requirement for mental health instruction, officers are exposed to training that will help them when encountering a patient.

He said the officers attend eight-hour sessions on a variety of topics, including departmental policy procedures, processing crime scenes and patrol procedures.

“The mental health may be a one- or two-hour block in a training day,” he said.

Before Athens officers reach full duty, they get at least 15 weeks of on-the-road training, during which time they typically are exposed to a mental health patient situation, Johnson said.

Moulton police Chief Lyndon McWhorter said his department does not require mental health training in its written policy in addition to the state minimum for certification.

“We’ve had some training,” McWhorter said. “We probably need more, because we do have to deal with people with mental illness. It occurs more often than not. Our officers do training on all different topics.”