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Ala sheriff: Training not enough for mental health care crisis

"Our weakness is not in our training," Lawrence County Sheriff Gene Mitchell said. "Our weakness is the lack of treatment that's available."

By Jonece Dunigan
The Decatur Daily

DECATUR, Ala. — Lawrence County Sheriff Gene Mitchell said his department would welcome more training with regard to dealing with the mentally ill, but that won't get to the root of the state's mental health problem.

"Our weakness is not in our training," Mitchell said. "Our weakness is the lack of treatment that's available."

Shane Watkins, 39 and schizophrenic, was shot at his Langtown home March 19 when two Lawrence County sheriff's investigators answered a domestic call Watkins made. The investigators were not equipped with Tasers, Mitchell said. Watkins charged the investigators when they ordered him to drop his weapon, and he was shot.

Watkins' mother, Darlene Watkins, said her son was carrying a box cutter. She denied he charged the investigators.

The State Bureau of Investigation is investigating the shooting.

Decatur resident Julie Moody-Collins, a mental health advocate who has befriended the Watkins family, agreed with Mitchell that the best way to prevent tragic conflicts between police and those suffering from mental illness is to expand treatment options.

As Moody-Collins wept with Watkins' family members last week, she said she sympathized with the officers.

"Don't get me wrong, I wish they would have Tased him," Moody-Collins said. "But to shoot him, that must be awful. It's just a bad spot to be put in that should have never happened."

In June, the U.S. Supreme Court will decide whether or not the Americans with Disabilities Act applies to police confrontations. If it does apply, police departments may be required to conduct more mental health training.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Alabama is one of five states with no agencies using Crisis Intervention Training, which is a comprehensive, 40-hour training course. The other states are Delaware, Rhode Island, Arkansas and West Virginia. NAMI is calling for nationwide expansion of the program.

Moody-Collins said more mental health training can help officers understand the mentally ill, but the primary responsibility is elsewhere. Alabama ranks 49th in mental health access, according to advocate organization Mental Health America, with no signs of improvement.

North Alabama Regional Hospital is slated to close in June, and Alabama Psychiatric Services closed in February.

As services shrink, the mentally ill population skyrockets in prisons and county jails. There were an estimated 356,268 mentally ill inmates nationwide in 2014, but only 35,000 were treated in state hospitals, according to a study by Treatment Advocacy Center and the National Sheriffs' Association.

"The police are the ones that catch the brunt of it," Collins said. "They can be trained to deal with it, but the police can't

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be expected to be mental health workers.”

Law enforcement has only one option when dealing with mentally ill inmates, Mitchell said. They have to go to the probate judge for an involuntary commitment order, but that process bears risks.

His department had to chase a mentally ill inmate Wednesday for two hours after he escaped a counseling session at the Lawrence County Mental Health Center. He later was caught in a wooded area just off Payne Avenue in Moulton.

“It’s a cumbersome system,” Mitchell said. “Jails are not hospitals. Jails are for incarcerating people that are under criminal charges.”

North Alabama Regional Hospital wasn’t the first state mental health facility to be placed on the chopping block. Greil Memorial Psychiatric Hospital in Montgomery and Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon closed in 2012, saving the state \$40 million, according to state officials.

Darlene Watkins tried to get her son treatment at facilities in Moulton and Decatur, she said, but was denied because there were not enough beds.

She said he had been off his medications for three weeks at the time of the shooting.

“It made me sick because it was so preventable,” Darlene Watkins said of her son’s death and the lack of access to mental health care. “It’s not his mental illness that killed him. It’s negligence.”

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