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TOP STORY

Experts say more crisis intervention training needed for police

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Every day police officers in the Tennessee Valley encounter mentally ill people, but experts say the lack of training for those encounters can have deadly consequences.

A recent study from the [Treatment Advocacy Center](#) shows people with mental illnesses are 16 times more likely than others to be killed by police.

While police officers are required to go through [480 hours](#) of training to be certified by the Alabama Peace Officers Standards and Training Commission, only four of those hours are devoted to interacting with mentally ill individuals. Beyond those four hours, Alabama state law does not require any additional training.

Lt. Proncey Robertson with the Decatur Police Department said their new hires receive three hours of mental health training. The rest of the department hasn't gone through that class since 2013.

But just the other day, Decatur Police officers had to confront 44-year-old Michelle Owens, who's accused of killing her husband. In court Owens' family said she suffers from schizophrenia.

That's not something most people have experienced, which is why the National Alliance on Mental Illness actually simulates the disorder for officers undergoing training.

"They can hear the voices of those with schizophrenia, what voices are actually telling people to do," [NAMI Alabama](#) Executive Director Wanda Laird explained.

The organization has been partnering with Auburn University at Montgomery's [Alabama Crime Prevention Clearinghouse](#) to fill the gap in training. The Crisis Intervention Team program provides 20 hours of hands-on training to officers across the state.

Unfortunately, even that program is at risk of being cut. NAMI officials told WAAY 31 there are two more sessions this year, but right now there's not enough funding for a third.

Laird hopes legislation requiring officers to complete the training will be written and passed in Montgomery.

"Right now we're just trying to do our very best on a shoestring. It needs to be passed so that funds are provided from the state level, instead of us trying to write small grants," she said.

Cat Reid

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