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Police improve response to rising number of mental health calls

By John Flowers



Mourning Fox, who was hired last fall as director of mental health programs for the Vermont Department of Public Safety, said Vermont police are getting special training to deal with an increasing number of people in mental health crisis.

ADDISON COUNTY — There was a time not too long ago when Middlebury police didn't receive enough calls requesting mental health-related help to classify them separately in the department's yearly stats.

But that's changed dramatically since 2017, according to Chief Tom Hanley.

In 2017, Middlebury police responded to 46 cases in which mental health/psychiatric issues were either the "primary or proximate cause" of police intervention. That went up to 54 cases in 2018, 75 in 2019, 144 in 2020 and 259 last year. There have been 83 such calls for service so far this year, putting it on track to meet or exceed the department's 2021 total.

"We're seeing more of these cases than we ever did," Hanley said. "What has changed is the entire culture of dealing with this. If you got a mental health call 25 years

ago, you hated it. You wanted to get in and get done, call CSAC (the Counseling Service of Addison County) and have them deal with the person. Now we realize it's a regular part of what we do."

And it's not just in Middlebury.

Vermont State Police and leaders of the Vergennes and Bristol police departments are also reporting major surges in calls involving persons experiencing mental health crises. This has prompted public safety organizations to refine their response tactics and in some cases seek additional staffing devoted specifically to mental health-related cases.

Bristol police are asking for a cut of the community's federal American Rescue Plan Act funding to hire an embedded mental health worker.

SPECIALIZED TRAINING

The VSP last fall hired a director of mental health programs and is in the process of hiring mental health

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crisis specialists to embed in each of its 10 barracks throughout the state — including here in Addison County.

Mourning Fox is the newly hired director of mental health programs for the Vermont Department of Public Safety. He said troopers assigned to the VSP's New Haven barracks in 2020 responded to 37 service calls in Addison County involving people with mental health issues, a number that grew to 48 cases during 2021.

Such increases, which manifest in other parts of the state as well, have led to more specialized training at the Vermont Police Academy, where all the state's law enforcement personnel are put through the paces to ensure their readiness in the field. Their academy training, according to Fox, includes two days of programming that's particularly helpful for future, potential encounters with individuals experiencing mental health issues. It emphasizes de-escalation and standard practices for interacting with people in crisis.

In addition to learning response techniques, trainees are introduced to people who have experienced previous contact with police while dealing with psychiatric illness, according to Fox.

He said aspiring officers and troopers are taught to do the following when they first encounter someone having a mental health crisis: Slow things down. Use your first name, instead of your police title and last name. Open a dialogue, be friendly and treat the subject with the respect to which you believe you're also entitled.

"Part of taking command of a situation... doesn't necessarily work so well when you're talking about a crisis situation like that," said Fox.

The academy's specialized programming has been a part of Vermont law enforcement training for "well over a decade," Fox added, but he noted VSP troopers — as opposed to municipal police trainees — also receive additional training. For three weeks before and after their academy experience, VSP troopers receive supplemental instruction, some of it focusing on how to interact with people in crisis. Some of the material is taught by Fox, who has an extensive resumé in the mental health field, where he has more than 25 years of experience, including more than four years as deputy commissioner of the Vermont Department of Mental Health.

Fox's short- and long-term goals for the VSP include:

- Ensure each VSP barracks has at least one embedded mental health crisis specialist. In Addison County, that specialist is Chris George, a Counseling Service of Addison County employee who's assigned to the New Haven barracks. Efforts to reach George for this article were unsuccessful as the Independent went to press.
- Conducting regular meetings with the mental health crisis specialists, state troopers, VSP command staff, first responders and other stakeholders on coordinated efforts to address mental health-related cases.
- Helping the Department of Public Safety's ongoing work to "re-imagine the model of how the police provide services to Vermonters who may be experiencing a mental-health or substance-use-disorder crisis, or who have other unmet social-service needs," according to a press release that announced Fox's hiring last September.

Fox said he's excited to be working in an arena where there's an "intersection of law enforcement, criminal justice systems and mental health."

And he's not doing it by himself.

CRISIS SPECIALISTS

The embedded mental health crisis specialists provide key assistance for troopers — and not only on calls centering on a person with mental health issues. We're talking about a wide range of calls, according to Fox, including bad accident scenes. Crisis specialists can help accident survivors — and family members of those who have perished in fatal crashes — to sort out their feelings.

"It can prevent that (accident survivor) from showing up in your local emergency room a week or two later because of intrusive nightmares and inability to sleep because of the car accident that happened two weeks ago," Fox said.

As of this week, mental health crisis specialists had been hired at seven of the VSP's 10 barracks. State police contract with area mental health agencies to provide those specialists, who can be deployed by troopers on calls. In most cases, the specialists have agreed to be on call and on a flex-time schedule, realizing that crises can occur outside of the conventional work week.

Crisis specialists help a person work through their problems, while learning about the person's specific case history.

In some cases, the subject's mental health status provides cause for an involuntary committal to a psychiatric facility, Fox noted, and the embedded specialists can get that process going. But the specialist will continue to be a resource for the individual after they've been discharged from the psychiatric hospital, Fox noted.

"That's a pretty unique situation," he said.

Middlebury police have a close working relationship with CSAC, which has an emergency team that can respond to officers' calls for help and/or provide advice in cases involving persons with mental health issues. Also, state police have on occasion been able to provide Chris George's assistance to Addison County's municipal police departments.

HANDLING IT IN-HOUSE

Middlebury police officers are sometimes able to resolve mental health-related disturbances on their own, according to Hanley.

"A number of these cases are people who we know who are clients who have had mental health problems before, and we can usually defuse or intervene without having to get them further treatment," he said.

A decade ago, Hanley began exploring the prospect of getting an embedded mental health worker for his department.

“We made an effort to get funding for it, but it never worked,” he said.

Hanley acknowledged that some might wonder if the department could find enough work for a full-time mental health worker on his staff. But he believes such a worker’s skills could also be applicable to training officers, assisting with domestic abuse cases and defusing neighborhood disputes. So an embedded mental health worker remains a goal for the Middlebury PD.

“If we have someone embedded here who we can also use for a variety of community service activities, it would be helpful,” he said.

Middlebury officers currently train with CSAC officials, though that can be tricky in terms of scheduling, Hanley said.

Meanwhile, the mental health-related cases continue to pile up, though Hanley acknowledged Middlebury’s 2020 and 2021 higher stats coincide with the COVID-19 pandemic and thus reflect the temporary relocation of a large number of homeless individuals — some suffering with mental illness — to the county’s shire town.

In most instances, police are the first responders to these cases and that’s not going to change, according to Hanley.

“We’ve been trying to do things in partnership with our other public safety partners to try to keep everyone safer and healthier without escalating a situation,” he said.

Vergennes Police officers responded to 138 calls for service involving mental health issues from January 2020 through last month, according to Chief George Merkel. He called that figure conservative, given that some calls counted under a specific criminal offense might have involved persons with mental health challenges.

“The scope of law enforcement has changed quite dramatically over the past decade, and we’re dealing with more and more mental health issues for whatever reason that might be,” he said.

Vergennes officers receive mental health-related training through the police academy. In addition, the department recently sent one of its own, Sgt. Jason Ouellette, to “Verbal Judo School,” which according to its website teaches the “powerful way of persuasion that helps us to avoid, resolve and manage resistance by using presence and words, whether to resolve conflict or to close a deal with a customer.”

Ouellette is now certified to teach the course, which he does to his fellow officers.

The training has already paid dividends, according to Merkel.

“We’ve had a couple of instances where even though the person was experiencing a mental health crisis, the techniques we used helped defuse these challenging situations,” he said. “A lot of it has to do

with the officer's demeanor when you first approach somebody; to not be confrontational, to listen to what they say and evaluate them to see exactly what's going on with them. Try to develop a rapport or a bond with the person so they aren't scared or intimidated, and are more willing to work with you."

Like Middlebury PD, Vergennes PD contacts CSAC — and/or the VSP's Chris George — for cases in which a subject needs professional care.

PROJECT VISION NORTH

Merkel doesn't hesitate to bring other stakeholders into the mix, including officials from the Turning Point Center of Addison County, which works with persons recovering from substance use disorder.

"There are more resources out there to help us," he said. "It's not just the mental health aspect, it's some of the other things that might contribute to the person's anxiety."

The spirit of teamwork, Merkel noted, is embodied in a Rutland-based organization called Project Vision, a coalition of more than 400 partners striving to "create an environment of collaboration... to expand community engagement, build great neighborhoods, and improve public health" in the Rutland area.

Merkel has sought to create that same kind of collaboration in Addison County. To that end, he's organized a local "Project Vision North" effort through which multiple Addison County police agencies, social service organizations and mental health professionals meet monthly via Zoom. Among other things, they discuss recent calls for service and flag folks who are repeatedly appearing on the police radar for mental health challenges so everyone at the Zoom meeting is aware of who needs more mental health treatment and wraparound services.

Project Vision North has been well worth the effort, Merkel said.

He cited the example of a Vergennes woman who generated more than 60 calls for police service during a five-month period. Bringing the collective resources of Project Vision North to bear on the case has resulted in only five calls to the same address during the past five months.

"It's a great concept and the way we've got to do business," he said of Project Vision North. "It's worked beyond my wildest dreams."