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## Nashua, Hudson police learning to detect signs of mental illness

By JOSEPH G. COTE Staff Writer



Don Himself

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That's why Susan Mead, Community Council's community educator and outreach coordinator, spends a good amount of time talking to police officers, rookies and veterans alike, about how to spot and communicate people in the throes of mental illness.

"There's an increased interest that they need to understand when they are dealing with someone with mental issues," Mead said. "They have to understand . . . is it mental illness

or is it behavioral issues? That's the crux of what I'm trying to get across to them."

For the last several years, Mead has worked with officers at the Nashua and Hudson police departments.

In Nashua, that includes two hours of training for all new hires at the department's in-house academy held every fall, plus brief refreshers over the course of the year at some of the department's daily roll calls.

In Hudson, the training is given at an annual hour-plus session covering everything from the signs and symptoms of common diseases, such as bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, to when and how to file an involuntary emergency admission form.

"I show them the tools that the mental health center can use," she said, "give them tools to recognize the signs and symptoms of mental illness. Honestly, I don't think police have enough training in mental illness. This is our effort to step it up in our community." Nashua police Lt. John Fisher, the department's training officer, said working with mentally ill people is nothing new for police, but today's officers are armed with more information than ever before.

"It's an important part of your toolbox as an officer to have as complete an understanding as possible of mental illness," he said. "None of our folks want to be without that tool. Our officers know more about working with people with mental illness than I did 20 years ago."

Hudson's new police chief, Jason Lavoie, took a similar view.

"Years ago it was a lot easier to slap cuffs on someone and have the courts deal with them, but that's really not what we should be doing."

In addition to working with those two local departments, Mead trains more than 200 soon-to-be officers at the New Hampshire Police Standards and Training Council, the state's police academy in Concord.

There, Mead is given an entire seven-hour day and covers many of the same topics in greater depth.

"The training's important because we have so many people out there with mental illness," Maj. Bob Stafford, the council's assistant director, said. "We need to be able to quickly tell if someone's suffering from mental illness. We have to make a decision in seconds just for everyone's safety."

He said the council requires four hours of classroom training on mental illness for its part-time certification course and eight hours of classroom and scenario training for its full-time course. It also offers one-day, in-service classes for veteran officers.

The academy training sessions take advantage of the partnerships the council has developed with mental health providers like Community Council, Riverbend Community Mental Health in Concord and the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

The classes are often led by mental health providers, like Mead, and cover everything from different types of mental illness and personality disorders, suicide prevention and intervention, and how to execute involuntary admissions, Stafford said.

"That's what police officers will be faced with most often," he said.

More recently, cadets have also heard from a "consumer," or someone who suffers from mental illness and talks to the trainees and answers questions about how it affects their lives and decisions and their experience with the mental health and criminal justice system.

"The consumer really enlightens the students as to what it is like to suffer from mental illness and (is) quite candid about the mental illness they have suffered," Stafford said. "It gives the students a chance to ask questions about how they deal with things."

Stafford said as the number of in-patient beds for serious mental illness declined, police contacts with mentally ill suspects increased.

"This is an issue that throughout my career I've had to deal with," said Stafford, a 20-year law enforcement veteran. "I think we have a better understanding now."

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