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Police Brutality Against Those With Mental Illness: How to Protect Maine's People

In January of 2021, a man by the name of Patrick Warren Sr. was shot at his home by police officer Reynaldo Contreras in Killeen, Texas after responding to a mental health check. Warren's family called the local police in hopes to send a mental health crisis professional to his home. Instead a standard police officer, who was not trained in mental health crisis, arrived as the professional was reportedly not available to do so. The visit ended with Warren being shot and later dying in the hospital due to his injuries. Another story of just this year was a 9-year-old girl who also fell victim to police brutality. The girl's mother called the local Rochester, New York police in response to the girl threatening to commit suicide while also threatening her mother. As an only hope, the 9-year-old's mother called the Rochester police department to help manage the situation. The visit ended with the little girl being handcuffed and pepper sprayed. Both of these calls were made on the basis of a mental health crisis, and neither of the named local police departments were properly trained in such a field. One can only assume these police departments are not alone in a lack of proper mental health training. Police brutality is a grave issue and those with mental health conditions are disproportionately affected. To propose a solution, the implementation of mandatory mental health crisis training in all police departments will guide police officers to better pursue situations and take the most responsible course of action necessary. Enacting such a proposal will benefit both civilians and law enforcement agents.

It is reported that around 61.5 million Americans will experience mental illness at some point in their lifetime, and 3-6% of law enforcement encounters involve those with mental illness. That is anywhere from 184,500-369,000 people with mental illness that may encounter law enforcement. In 2016, 25% of those killed by police were linked to mental illness, and the numbers are only rising. It is important to consider if all mental health crisis encounters with law enforcement are dangerous. A simple answer is no, not all. Though, those with mental illness are disproportionately involved in critical police encounters including use of force, arrests, and police shootings. While Maine provides free crisis intervention training, not all police officers take advantage of this opportunity, and not all states provide this option. This puts Mainers with mental illness at a disproportionate risk that could be very well avoided. Training is extremely beneficial as it can provide officers with knowledge to feel more confident approaching a mental

health crisis situation, and helps educate to remove biases and stigma. While intervention programs do not promise permanent changes, according to research conducted, of the 96% respondents that dealt with mental health crisis interventions, 61% used their training, and 67% felt the training increased their ability to deal with a mental health crisis. Intervention training aims to avoid any unnecessary force that could be used on subjects. Law enforcement will continue to lack proper education pertaining to mental health call-ins unless there is change.

“Defunding the police” has been a hot topic for a period of time now, but this proposal should not be confused with such a phrase. Rather, I am advocating for the shifting of funds to support mental health training, and have it be mandatory in order to receive law enforcement certification. When it comes to funds, a police department in Louisville, Kentucky implemented mental health crisis training, and it was shown that there are great cost savings to providing mental health training. In this medium-sized city it was found that there was an annual cost savings of \$1.1 million since the initiation of a crisis intervention program. Police departments need specialized mental health crisis training as mental illness is a huge factor in American lives. A great place to start is by reaching out to your local representative asking them to contact the Crisis Intervention Team program in hopes of implementing a training service for all Maine communities. Congresswoman Chellie Pingree is Maine’s First District representative and her contact information can be found at her page <https://pingree.house.gov/contact/>, and Congressman Jared Golden is Maine’s Second District representative with his contact information at <https://jaredgoldenforcongress.com/contact/>. Let us advocate for not only those with mental illness, but also police officers in order to better pursue situations and take the most responsible course of action necessary for our Maine people.