Behavioral Health Unit: Case Study at the Portland Police Department

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Recommended Citation
Sedlack, Anne, "Behavioral Health Unit: Case Study at the Portland Police Department" (2017). Thinking Matters. 94.
http://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/thinking_matters/94
Behavioral Health Unit: Case Study at the Portland Police Department

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Abstract

There are 8,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States. 1,000 have some form of specialized policing and response presence - which means that they have at least a few officers who are crisis intervention trained (CIT). 200 of these law enforcement agencies have some form of program that is beyond a few police officers trained in CIT. In 2016, there were 6 departments that were awarded a grant from the Department of Justice and Bureau of Justice Assistance. These six are currently learning sites dedicated to studying the affects of having a behavioral health specialized co-response team. The Portland Police Department and its’ mental health co responder unit is one of the six law enforcement agencies. The goal of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of the Behavioral Health Unit and it’s impact on the greater Portland community for the police department, community partners and clients.

Results

Flow of Services

- Client
  - “It felt to me like it was taking - I was suffering with some psychotic commands and trying to explain that to him was scary.”

- Dispatch
  - “We try to get as much information as we can from the caller to create a safe space so that whenever a responder gets on scene we have a kind of deal with if the subject if aggressive, or if they have weapons or if they are being delusional.”

- Police
  - “Take some of the stress off the police officers, not really stress, but the responsibility. I’m not a trained counselor. I don’t know all the different agencies that are out there to assist these guys. This is what they can bring to you. They can give you that information.”

- Behavioral Health Unit
  - “What I mean by slowing down is to identify what the problem is in a calm way and try to weed out the safety issues first, of course, and then be that person that helps like, “Let’s figure out what is really going on,” versus how we’re feeling in the moment or whatever else.”

Results

Adherence to Mission

1. Collaboration
   1. “I think the biggest thing that I see is, our team really can bounce around and connect with all the major players in the community. While they don’t necessarily talk to each other that well, we talk to everybody. Because we’re mobile, at least in my position, I physically go to a lot of places and see people in person so I can connect the dots. Also, we are known in the community at this point.”

2. Crisis Calls
   1. “It’s people who are looking for help who maybe don’t have the words or the tools to ask for it the right way. And the BHU are kind of helping them have those words or to have those tools or maybe the BHU is speaking for them and giving us that information so that we are not reacting as aggressively as we normally would who we think might be danger to themselves or others.”

3. Follow Ups
   1. “Creating consistent follow-ups with people that they know are prone to crisis has reduced the amount of times that first responders and the police officers have to go to these residences.”

4. Training for Police Officers
   1. “Then beyond that helping people self realize that they have coping skills and that they they have some tools. That sometimes while you’re in crisis you often forget about it. Again because of the Behavioral Health Unit, you learn a softer approach. You dig a little bit deeper and I’ve been able to help people.”

Discussion

There are only six learning sites in the United States that are dedicated to a true co-respondor model, which pairs mental health professionals with police officers. There is not a lot of research out there so this study was meant to be a cursory look at how the Behavioral Health Unit operates and how close it gets to meeting their mission.

The Portland Police Department’s Behavioral Health Unit seems to be making the best with what they have. The times that it misses it mark, like not having 24 hour coverage, are issues with funding not with operation. All of the interviewees spoke to the success the program has with collaboration and connecting clients with already established resources.

Limitations to the program

- More Community Resources
- More BHU Members
- Technical Improvements
- Variety of Hours
- Better Collaboration for New Mainer Population
- Education around Mental Health

Legal Recourse

“This is something we’re literally investing in being a community that gets this and does care about relationships and does see relationships as being the answer to how you eventually, over time, reduce incidences like this.”

Next Steps

There are currently 6 established learning sites in the United States with four more in the process of being approved. There are over 8,000 law enforcement agencies.

It is vital to continue to conduct research on all six’s programming to establish what works, what doesn’t and to get more education out there about the potential support that these programs could provide to a community.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jo Freedman and the entire team over at the Behavioral Health Unit for agreeing to be involved in this research. In addition to the unit, I would like to thank all those who gave their time to be interviewed, life is busy and I truly appreciated the time you gave. I would also like to extend my deepest gratitude to Paula Gerstenblatt – she is a true mentor and has been a critical resource in this process. I would finally like to thank Diane Rhodes for imparting her countless wisdom on case studies.