

Coalition says police need better training when confronting mentally ill

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Better police training about how to interact with people with mental health conditions and developmental disabilities can prevent needless tragedy, an American Baptist official told a Senate panel.

“Recent high-profile tragedies demonstrate the need for law enforcement officers to receive additional training to safely address crisis situations involving persons with mental health conditions,” Curtis Ramsey-Lucas, managing director of resource development at the American Baptist Home Mission Societies, said in testimony submitted to the [Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights](#).



Curtis Ramsey-Lucas Recently, a Dallas police officer was [indicted](#) for aggravated assault for shooting and seriously wounding a 52-year-old mentally ill man last October. Police in Madison, Wis., recently shot and killed three suspects in as many days who authorities say had a history of mental illness and became violent.

A 2012 [investigation](#) by the *Portland Press Herald* and *Maine Sunday Telegram* reported at least half of the estimated 375 to 500 people shot and

killed by police each year in the United States have mental health problems.

“Given the inadequate mix of social and mental health services, law enforcement officers have increasingly become the first responders for people with mental illness or developmental disabilities who are in crisis,” Ramsey-Lucas testified on behalf of the Interfaith Disability Advocacy Coalition. “In these situations, it is important that officers be adequately trained to respond effectively and properly to the needs of all concerned.”

Ramsey-Lucas represents American Baptists on the steering committee of the [interfaith coalition](#), a program of the American Association of People with Disabilities formed to mobilize the religious community to speak out and take action on disability policy issues with Congress, the president and administration, and society at large.

Resource for congregations

Last April, the AAPD published [Grounded in Faith: Resources on Mental Health and Gun Violence](#) for congregational leaders, disability advocates and others concerned that ongoing debate around gun violence might further stigmatize people with mental illness.

In preparing the report, Ramsey-Lucas said coalition members learned most violence is carried out by people who are not mentally ill, and people with mental illness are far more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators.

The Baptist leader said such insight is relevant to lawmakers because “misconceptions about violence and mental illness can cause discrimination and unnecessarily hamper the recovery of the nearly 20 percent of all Americans who experience some form of mental illness each year.”

“Moreover, misconceptions about violence and mental illness, prevalent in

society at large, also shape law enforcement perceptions and approaches to persons with mental health conditions,” he said.

States and localities that have employed innovative solutions like crisis intervention teams have seen fewer injuries and deaths among both officers and people with mental illness or developmental disabilities, increased jail diversion rates, fewer lawsuits and stronger ties to the mental health and disabilities communities, Ramsey-Lucas said. He recommended that police training seek to “demystify” mental illness and overcome prejudice and stereotypes.

Relating to the ‘whole person’

“Training materials that refer to situations involving people with developmental disabilities and mental illnesses as problems or generally violent predisposes the person and situation as adverse,” he said. “Resources that describe the prevalence of mental health conditions and that use alternative language to describe individuals as ‘living with a mental health condition’ as opposed to ‘mentally ill,’ or that describe a person as ‘living with a disability’ as opposed to ‘disabled’ will help officers relate to the whole person rather than perceiving an individual as defined by their condition or disability.”

“When confronting a situation that involves people with disabilities or mental health conditions, training that is rooted in such an approach may better prepare officers to adapt to the situation without negative judgment and to offer understanding rather than only trying to de-escalate the situation,” he said.

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Improving officer awareness and understanding of mental illness would

improve police response to incidents involving persons with mental health conditions, Ramsey-Lucas said.

Police liaison offices deploying specialized police officers or civilians, like police chaplains trained in crisis intervention, can help with specialized knowledge, skills and expertise in responding to situations involving mental illness.

For example, he said, verbal engagement sometimes can de-escalate a situation involving an agitated person when the use of restraint and coercive commands might do the opposite.

Collaboration needed

The criminal justice and mental health communities must collaborate so that police officers have options other than arrest or hospitalization when responding to those with a mental illness, Ramsey-Lucas said.

“Beyond these more immediate concerns involving law enforcement, as a society we must do more to address the stigma associated with mental illness,” he concluded. “It is estimated that almost half of all Americans will experience symptoms of a mental health condition—mental illness or addiction—at some point in their lives. Yet, today, less than one in five children and adolescents with diagnosable mental health conditions receive the treatment they need.”

Fewer than four in 10 adults with diagnosable mental health conditions receive needed treatment, and just one in 10 of those with substance abuse disorders, he said.

“When proper treatment and supportive services are not received, crisis situations can arise affecting individuals, families, schools and communities—situations in which law enforcement officers too often find themselves to be the first responder,” he said.

“While we must do all we can to adequately train police officers to respond effectively in such situations, we must also do more to address the needs of individuals and families before they reach a point of crisis.”

Others testifying at the subcommittee hearing included Patti Saylor of Frederick County, Md., whose 26-year-old son with Down syndrome [died in police custody](#) in January 2013 after being handcuffed and dragged out of a movie theater he didn't want to leave after watching *Zero Dark Thirty* with his 18-year-old brother.

Assistant Majority Leader Dick Durbin (D-Ill.), chairman of the subcommittee, said that Congress and the executive branch should do more to help local and state law enforcement agents who have increasingly become the first responders for disabled individuals in crisis due to inadequate mental health and social services.