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Tucson police to be trained in handling mental-health crisis calls

By Carmen Duarte Arizona Daily Star May 18, 2017

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Chris Magnus

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Tucson police patrol officers are receiving behavioral-health training to better handle mental-health crisis calls, and 500 officers are expected to complete the training by the end of the year, Chief Chris Magnus said Thursday.

“This department is well ahead of the curve across the country,” said Magnus, in reference to its Mental Health Support Team, which is called out to serious situations to help de-escalate a crisis.

However, the need for mental-health interventions is great and patrol officers — who are the first to respond — need more training “to treat folks who are in crisis,” Magnus said at a news conference at the department’s west-side substation, 1310 W. Miracle Mile.

Staff members from Cenpatico Integrated Care, the regional behavioral-health authority for eight counties in Southern Arizona, were at the conference and are working with TPD in training and providing \$10,000 in educational books for the department.

Cenpatico receives \$33 million through a contract with the Arizona Department of Health Services and the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System for mental-health services in the region.

“One in eight calls to TPD for service involves someone in crisis who needs mental-health assistance,” said the police chief. “There is a lot of need out there.”

According to department data, in fiscal year 2014-15, officers transported 4,060 people in crisis for mental-health evaluations and treatment.

Magnus said a two-day Pima County conference on “Decriminalizing Mental Illness” brought criminal-justice workers, law enforcement officers and behavioral-health experts together to discuss treatment rather than jail terms for those suffering from mental health and substance abuse.

“Two million people a year with mental-health and substance-abuse issues are incarcerated nationwide. Jails have become de-facto mental-health institutions,” said Magnus, adding that incarceration is costly and is not a good environment for treatment.

“We have a waiting list of officers who want to take the training,” said Magnus of the eight-hour course that covers situations including how to deal with someone having suicidal thoughts; depression; panic attacks; traumatic events affecting adults or children; acute psychosis; aggressive behavior; and those undergoing substance abuse and need emergency medical treatment.

He said those in need are not just street people, but families and friends in every neighborhood and every socioeconomic level.

“We are not trying to turn cops into clinicians,” said Magnus. He said the idea behind mental-health training is to help officers say and do what is necessary to help the person in crisis.

Once the person is taken for a medical evaluation, Cenpatico and other agencies will connect with the patient for follow-up care with their own physicians and behavioral-health agencies.

Sgt. Jason Winsky, head of the Mental Health Support Team, trains rookies about how to deal with mental-health crisis situations at the police academy and will continue to work with Cenpatico on training at the academy and with training of other Southern Arizona law-enforcement agencies.

Magnus said once patrol officers complete the mental-health first-aid course, then detectives, dispatchers, supervisors and remaining staff members will undergo the course.

Contact reporter Carmen Duarte at cduarte@tucson.com or 573-4104. On Twitter: @cduartestar

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