

CRISIS INTERVENTION TRAINING SAVES LIVES

by Ventura County Supervisor Linda Parks, December 2010

It's not a place you want to find yourself but when your job is protecting the public's safety, dealing with people who are unstable goes with the territory. Yet it was beyond the call of duty when, on a cold November night, deputies Ryan Lindsey and John Sanders stepped out on a slippery rock with a 40 foot drop to the ocean. Standing side by side they were able to end a standoff with a despondent resident who, when they found her, had one leg over the edge and was ready to jump to her death.

Having the presence of mind and the agility to protect themselves from falling while keeping the woman from jumping and perhaps grabbing or pushing them along the way, is the stuff that makes heroes. It was through their bravery and their training that Ventura County Deputy Sheriffs Sanders and Lindsey succeeded in saving a life.

Almost half the calls to 911 in Ventura County involve people who are under the influence or mentally ill, or both. Suicide calls come in weekly and police officers and mental health professionals are often dispatched to help. When there are weapons involved, dealing with disturbed individuals is solely in the hands of law enforcement. Being trained in Crisis Intervention is an integral part of police and deputy training in the Sheriff's Department and in city police agencies throughout Ventura County.

In 2001, after a decade that saw seventeen cases of officer involved shootings of individuals with mental illness, including eight in one year, the County added Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) for its deputies and city police departments. The training has resulted in better management by officers of critical incidents involving persons experiencing a mental health crisis.

The Crisis Intervention Training consists of four 10-hour sessions with instructors who include mental health experts, police officials and relatives of persons with mental illness. The officers learn about various mental diseases, their common symptoms and how to positively interact to de-escalate a situation involving a person with mental health issues.

The original goal was to train 10% of patrol officers. The success of the program was immediately apparent and has grown to include half the patrol officers in the county. 911 dispatchers have also been trained and there is a trained CIT dispatcher on each shift.

Since Ventura County moved forward with Crisis Intervention Training, and introduced Taser guns for use by law enforcement, the use of firearms has almost been eliminated and the number of injuries and deaths to deputies and civilians has been dramatically reduced.

Unfortunately, the tough economy has caused more people to become desperate and suicidal. In the last year alone there have been two rescues at Mugu Rock where safety personnel put their lives at risk to save despondent people.

While we can only admire and respect the heroes who put themselves at risk to save others, we also must do what we can as friends, family and fellow citizens to recognize people who need help and try to bring them in before they reach the brink of despair.

Close to one-tenth of Americans experience some type of mental illness in their lives. Knowing that help is a call away can get someone the treatment they need and avert a crisis. For information regarding mental health services or to contact the County Behavioral Health Department's Mobile Crisis Team which operates 24-hours a day, you can call (866) 998-2243. For families of the mentally ill, support services are available through the National Alliance of the Mentally Ill (NAMI), which can be reached in Ventura County at (805) 641-2426.

The County Behavioral Health Department is also sponsoring a series of free trainings in "Mental Health First Aid", which helps non-professionals gain strategies for how to best interact with individuals who may be experiencing emotional distress due to a mental illness. Organizations interested in receiving this training can call 805-981-6830 for more information.