

Police officer credits crisis program in Rte. 9 rescue

By Milton J. Valencia, Globe Staff | November 25, 2007

FRAMINGHAM - Officer Brian Curtis has heard it before: No one could help him, no one understood, no one cared. The man was dangling in the cold darkness Friday night from a foot bridge 30 feet above Route 9 in Framingham Centre, and Curtis was trying to respond with what he'd learned recently in an innovative program.

"You have to break that barrier; you've got to make them understand you're trying to help," he said.

If Curtis, a 24-year-old rookie, has learned anything in his nine months on the force, it's that sometimes people just need someone to talk to. And for the past four months, he's been working with counselors who have helped him and other officers know how to make a difference with them.

In the Jail Diversion Program, police have been working with mental health specialists to provide resources for people who need emotional help more than law enforcement assistance. The program was founded in Framingham four years ago in partnership with Advocate Inc., a mental health agency, and expanded this year to a handful of other communities in Greater Boston.

In all the chaos Friday, Curtis's conversation helped let down the man's guard, and other officers pulled the man to safety. He was taken to a hospital and referred for mental health counseling.

"It wouldn't do him any good to arrest him," Curtis said.

Urban police districts often have few resources to draw on when working with the mentally ill, but through the Jail Diversion Program, police have been coached on how to talk to them and get them referred for counseling. The effort has proved to be more productive than a criminal justice system that in the past has often returned the mentally ill to the streets without getting proper help, said police and a mental health advocate.

"It's the most humane and dignified and appropriate response for many of these calls," said Sarah Abbott, director of the Jail Diversion Program. "We want to get the bad guys, but we want to do something with the mentally ill."

The state Department of Mental Health has expanded the Jail Diversion Program to Milford, Lawrence, Taunton, Waltham, and Watertown this year, hoping to build off the success Framingham police have had in identifying and helping people with mental illness.

The program was founded as a way to deal with hostage cases in which mental illness is often a factor. Soon after, patrol officers handling everyday calls started working with counselors like Abbott. In the past four years, Framingham officers have referred 2,000 people for intervention. Just last week, Abbott said, she worked with eight people who needed help.

Abbott said the program has proved helpful in more quickly identifying people with mental illness, so counselors can intervene before they become a danger to themselves or others. She noted police calls that have turned deadly when officers confront a dangerous suspect who suffers from mental illness, such as the Boston police shooting last week of a correction officer who displayed mental problems.

"We like to think if we can intervene quicker, then we can avoid a potentially deadly outcome later on," Abbott said.

Officers who have worked with the counselors have picked up the techniques. Talk to the person, let them know you'll listen, the counselors tell officers. Be personal. Say their name.

"It's another tool in our belt," said Framingham police Lieutenant Paul Shastany. "When the mentally ill create nuisance crimes, it's sometimes better not to arrest them but to get them help."

Curtis said he listened to Abbott speak with a woman who was having hallucinations, believing crabs were surrounding her. He saw how Abbott quickly identified the woman's religious beliefs and let her pray before bringing her to a hospital. In another case, he listened to how Abbott spoke to a man who had just taken pills to kill himself, persuading him to seek medical help.

When Curtis arrived on the scene Friday night, at the bridge spanning Pleasant and High streets at the entrance to Framingham State College, he said he tried to imagine what Abbott would have said.

"I'm trying to understand you, so you need to explain it," the officer told the man. He kept repeating the man's name, to keep their conversation personal. "Why don't you tell me what's wrong with you," Curtis said.

Cars were passing under the bridge until police shut down Route 9, and spectators began gathering. One witness described how Curtis stood patiently as the man dangled, holding onto the rail, sometimes nearly letting go. Police closed the road as firefighters and state and local police positioned themselves to be able to catch the man if he jumped.

"I walked over and introduced myself and said, 'Hi, I'm Brian Curtis with the Framingham Police Department," he said. "I was just trying to talk to him and get him to talk to me."

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