

## Police take kinder approach to mentally ill

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By Paul Crocetti/Daily News staff

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MILFORD -

Starting next month, Milford Police in the field will have help communicating with the mentally ill.

As a result of \$60,000 in funding from the state Department of Mental Health, the Police Department will be working closely with jail diversion clinicians from Riverside Community Care on Milford Street in Upton in an attempt to avoid arresting mentally ill people involved in nonviolent crimes.

"Before the grant, police had two options: Arrest them for crimes like disturbing the peace and go through the court system or bring them to the already overcrowded emergency room and drop them off," said Mike Rubin, director of emergency services at Riverside, a mental health service provider.

Now, clinicians will help out in such ways as riding along with police or meeting them at locations where mentally ill people are involved in possible crimes, with a focus on getting them the proper treatment.

"How do we keep the person out of the hospital, out of the court system?" said Police Chief Thomas O'Loughlin, who applied for the funding. "We have the benefit of dealing with skilled people. I'm thrilled we're able to receive the grant. I know they're excited to work with us."

In some cases, mentally ill residents may not be able to get help due to a lack of insurance. The clinicians could aid them in the "cumbersome" process of acquiring insurance, Rubin said.

Clinicians may also come back to check in on the resident several days in a row if necessary, he said.

"We will get creative to come up with solutions so that (an) arrest is not the only option," Rubin said. "If the stumbling block is insurance, if it's transportation, we'll figure out ways to get people treatment to avoid them getting arrested."

The clinicians can also help family members of people with mental health issues, O'Loughlin said.

"It's a complete circle," he said. "We have people now who can collaborate with them. It really does tie up those loose ends."

Police are often familiar with certain mentally ill people in town, said Robert Kinscherff, assistant commissioner for forensic mental health at the DMH.

"Arresting is a blunt instrument that doesn't get you what you need," Kinscherff said. "Arresting a 79-year-old mother with Alzheimer's isn't going to solve the problem. The model is to have mental health professionals on the scene."

In the end, though, it is the responding officer's call, Kinscherff said.

"They rely on the (professional) expertise," he said.

In addition, representatives from Riverside will be on call for back-up at all times, Rubin said.

Rubin stressed that the clinicians will deal with those affected by nonviolent crimes.

"Many times because local police departments have no other options, they have to arrest people who are mentally ill for nonviolent crimes," Rubin said. "We're not advocating diverting people who have committed violent crimes. That is not what this is about."

Rubin said he hopes to extend the program beyond Milford.

"We would like to expand it to a consortium of several towns in Blackstone Valley," he said.

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