A proactive policing response for community members with a mental health condition

Mental health continues to be a significant health issue across NSW communities. Over the past year, the NSW Police Force Mental Health Intervention Team (MHIT) has improved the response capability of police officers and other frontline employees when they interact with members of the community with a mental illness.

Between 2015 and 2018 there was an increase in fatal outcomes during interactions between people with a mental illness and police. In response, the NSW State Coroner recommended improvements to first responder training, and the MHIT developed and implemented innovative training for police officers and other frontline employees. The training includes de-escalation techniques and referral options for people with mental illness in contact with the police.

The NSW Police Force developed this training in collaboration with the NSW Ministry of Health and NSW Ambulance. The collaboration identified key opportunities for change by investigating two decades of coronial recommendations relating to fatal outcomes between police officers and people with a mental illness. The review built an evidence base that was used to develop the Enhanced Policing Practice Model (EPPM), which was jointly launched by NSW Ambulance and NSW Police in 2019.

The EPPM is designed to enhance the capacity of first responders when they encounter highly distressed people with mental illness in high-risk situations. The program seeks to improve first responder awareness of their own psychological responses to stress and decision making under pressure, encouraging a more authentic response. The model is underpinned by three principles of de-escalation: time, safe distance and effective communication. It favours a 'care and treatment approach' over a singular enforcement approach. It challenges the misconceptions surrounding mental illness and seeks to promote a joint agency response to deliver better outcomes for people with mental illness.

To date, the NSWPF MHIT has trained 3,000 officers from across the state. Those who have completed the program are accredited as specialist Mental Health Intervention Officers and are clearly identified with the help of a metal MHIT badge, worn above their name plate. Upon graduation, the officers become prioritised first responders to mental health–related incidents within their commands. The MHIT has also trained one inspector/duty officer within each of the 32 Police Area Commands and 26 Police Districts across NSW. These officers assume the role of Mental Health Contact Officer and local advocate for mental health–related issues.

> "One thing that stood out for the MHIT staff when delivering the course, was the ability of Police Officers to enhance their already well developed communication skills to include empathy, acknowledgement of stigma and demonstrate authenticity to persons experiencing acute distress." – MHIT Manager

In December 2021, an evaluation of the EPPM identified a 43% reduction in critical incidents and a 22% reduction in complaints about the use of force on people with a mental illness since 2017. The evaluation rated satisfaction and increased skills of police officers.

Many elements of the EPPM training are transferable across agencies. With this in mind, the MHIT has asked the NSW Police Force senior executive team to widen the scope of the training to include all NSW Health paramedics and mental health clinicians, in a program scheduled for late 2022.

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