

# **The Law Enforcement Officer: “The New Fortified Social Worker”**

**Latino Social Work Organization (LSWO)  
2023 National Latinx SW Conference**

**Portland State University  
School of Social Work**

**Presented by:**

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# **Barry University**

# Presenter Information

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- Dr. Michael J. Alicea is a retired Law Enforcement Officer with over 32 years of active experience in the law enforcement profession. He also has over 27 years of clinical practice experience in both the public and private sector and was a Medical Social Worker with a regionally recognizes hospital in the South Florida area for over 20 years. He is an Assistant Professor at Barry University's School of Social Work. He has more than 15 years of experience presenting at local, state, and national conferences on subjects related to diversity, suicide awareness and prevention.

# Abstract

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Law enforcement officers have become the new fortified social worker, often responding to individuals experiencing mental distress. This new paradigm bridges service delivery with social workers, community mental health agencies as well as emergency medical facilities. A view of the contextual factors that may influence law enforcement actions with individuals experiencing mental health issues and the barriers law enforcement officers often face is examined. A comparative viewpoint of the legal and mental health system is also examined, with the objective of raising awareness of the social justice problems and the perceived lack of available resources facing the community they serve.

# Learning Objective No. 1

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An appreciation that the law enforcement officer now plays a major role in aiding people with emotional and mental health issues, coupled with the fact that officers act as a primary mental health resource for individuals in acute distress in the community.

# Learning Objective No. 2

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Understanding that law enforcement officers have become the front-line responders for crisis-type incidents, emergencies, mental health, homelessness, alcohol, and substance abuse situations. It's important to recognize that the modern-day police officer has become the primary referral source for clinical social workers, community mental health agencies as well as emergency medical facilities.

# Learning Objective No. 3

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Recognizing the lack of options for individuals with mental illness and the vicarious liability that a law enforcement officer is often faced with in either offering a suitable referral to an available crisis center and or community mental health center or in-custody arrest.

# Learning Objective No. 4

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Distinguishing the difference between mental health services providers with outpatient care and the access to these services that is limited by managed care, lack of insurance, and provider availability.

# Historical Perspective of the Social Work Profession

- In the early 20th century, social workers were mostly Christian women without college degrees working for charity organizations such as the
  - Salvation Army
  - Little Sisters of the Poor and
  - Goodwill



***Note:***

***Serving the public is an honorable deed no matter how it's done. Whether you want to be a police officer or a social worker, both play an important role in keeping communities safe and secure.***

# A Brief History of the Social Work Profession

- As a profession, social work officially originated in the 19th century as a movement primarily experienced within the United States and United Kingdom.
- After the demise of feudalism, those in poverty were seen as a direct threat to the social order, so the government formed the Poor Law and created an organized system to provide care to them.
- The Industrial Revolution sparked a great migration to urban areas throughout the Western world which led to an increased social problem and in turn social activism.

# A Brief History of the Social Work Profession

- Rescue societies (Precursor to the modern Social Worker) were initiated to provide support to resolve the problems of
  - Poverty
  - Disease
  - Prostitution
  - Mental illness, and
  - Other afflictions
- In the late 1800s, a new system emerged as a method for providing aid for social ills

# A Brief History of the Social Work Profession

- Jane Addams founded the U.S. Settlement House Movement to establish houses in poor urban areas to alleviate poverty
- A focus was placed more on understanding the causes of poverty through research, reform, and residence, early social workers in the movement provided the poor with educational, legal, and health services.
- By 1913, there were 413 settlements spread across 32 states in the nation to improve the lives of the poor.

# The Evolving Social Work Profession in America

- While the movements for social reform continued to escalate in the early 20th century and many schools of social work were established, the question of whether social work was a profession lingered
- In 1915, Dr. Abraham Flexner famously contended that social work was not a profession because it lacked specific application of theoretical knowledge to solving human issues

# The Evolving Social Work Profession in America

- As a result, the professionalization of social work began by concentrating on casework and the scientific method, and the American Association of Hospital Social Workers was established in 1918 to boost formal education opportunities in social work
- By 1929, university programs emphasized a more scientific basis to dealing with patients with mental illness
- As World War II ended, social work saw another great rise in the number of social workers to serve the needs of military veterans returning home from battle.

# The Evolving Social Work Profession in America

- By 1955, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) was formed to promote
  - Professional development
  - Advance social policies
  - Enhance educational opportunities in the field, and
  - Maintain professional standards of practice

# The Evolving Social Work Profession in America

- Today, social workers continue to lead the way towards social justice by developing private and charitable organizations to serve individuals and communities in need.
- The social work profession is seen today as one of the most diverse healthcare fields, that continues to grow much faster than the average for all other allied mental health occupations.



# So, What Does a Police Social Worker Do?



- Police social workers provide counseling and crisis response support for community members who are referred by police officers
- They may work within a police department or work at a social service agency and partner with law enforcement officials.

# So, What Does a Police Social Worker Do?

- They provide on-site support for
  - Victims of domestic violence or substance abuse
  - Accompanying first-responders to scenes that need someone to negotiate with an angry or distraught individual
  - Counsel residents who have lost loved ones, suffered from property damage,



# So, What Does a Police Social Worker Do?

- Design programs for at-risk youth
- Train police officers in
  - Stress management
  - Mental illness
  - Substance abuse
  - Domestic violence, and child abuse, and
  - Provide consultation and counseling services to police officers and their families when needed

# How Social Workers Can Help Police



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mSkKW1gaqs&pp=ygUVcG9saWNlIHNVY2lhbCB3b3JrZXJz>

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# Police and the Mentally III

- Police officers play a major role in assisting people with emotional difficulties and often act as a primary mental health resource for individuals in acute distress.



# Factors affecting Police Officers Responsibilities as First Responders

- Deinstitutionalization
- Reduction in funding for community-based mental health programs
- Lack of resources for individuals transitioning into communities from hospital settings, and
- An increase in the number of mentally ill persons in distress

Lamb, Weinberger, & Gross, (2004)

# Who's at Fault?

- Police Officers
- Mental Health System



Thompson, Reuland & Souweine, (2003)



# The Role of Emergency Hospital Services

- Play a significant role in failing this population by not providing adequate services upon admission
- Many individuals with mental illness wait a long time in hospitals before being assessed and many walk out of the hospitals in frustration without being seen, only to call 911 again
- The system has become a revolving door, especially for those individuals who are not connected with mental health providers in their communities

Shen, Cochran, & Moseley, (2008)



# Police Officers are Front-Line Responders to:

- Emergency Calls
- Mental Health Calls for Service
- Homelessness
- Alcohol and Substance A Calls for Service

Thompson, et al., (2003)



# Police Involved Contacts with the Mentally III



- Account for a significant amount of all police contacts
- Have become the primary referral source for psychiatric emergency calls

Borum, Deane, Steadman, & Morissey, (1998)

# The Problem with Police Response to the Mentally Ill

- Police Officers are not always equipped to address the needs of the mentally ill
- The mentally ill individuals often end up back in the law enforcement hands
- Psychiatric assistance is also not always readily available
- Police encounters with people with mental illness often result in arrests, when the individuals might have benefited more from mental health assistance



# The Correlations between Police Response and Incarceration

- Most individuals with severe mental health illness will be arrested at least once in their lifetime
- 20% of people with several mental illness are very often arrested within a few months of their first hospital admission (i.e., Typically charged with drug and alcohol abuse or public disorder offenses)

McFarland, Faulkner, Bloom, Hallaux, & Bray, (1989); Borum and colleagues (1998)

# The Criminality of the Mentally III



- Has become a more acute problem in recent years
- The mentally ill who have entered the criminal justice system has been on the rise
- In general, 10-15% of inmates have mental illness compared to 2% in the general population

# The Criminality of the Mentally III

- The most common mental health diagnoses for inmates are
  - Schizophrenia
  - Bipolar Disorder, and
  - Major Depression



# The Criminality of the Mentally III

- Jails and prisons have become psychiatric holding centers due to
  - Lack of more adequate resources
  - Lack of coordination and continuity of care, and
  - Limited access to mental health care



Theriot, (2003); Watson, et al., (2001)



# The Prevailing Research Focuses



- Efforts to understand the role that mental illness plays in propelling people into the criminal justice system
- On The importance of collaboration between law enforcement and social work

Slate, Roskes, Feldman, & Baerga, (2003)



# A Police Officers View of the Mentally III

- Is often seen as challenging and extremely difficult to manage
- They often feel inadequately trained to respond to situations involving people with mental illness
- They are expected to assess the individuals' mental health along with also ensuring the safety of the individual and the community



# The Predicament Faced by the Police Officer

- Providing a disposition that maintains a balance between the safety of the community and finding a solution for those who are deemed mentally ill



Borum, et al., (1998)

# How have the Police Addressed the Concern with the Mentally Ill (Current Trends)

- Law Enforcement agencies have been attempting to address the problem of criminalization of people with mental illness by collaborating more with the Social Work profession

Munets & Griffin, (2006)

# Implementing an Integrated Liaison Program with Social Workers Necessitates

- Bridging the efforts between law enforcement and mental health agencies
- Developing a comprehensive and collaborative approach to the mental health system and law enforcement community
- Facilitating a community partnership between law enforcement and mental health agencies to decriminalize people with mental illness

Butler, Leitenberg, & Fuselier, (1993)

# What is Needed to Create this Integration of Service (Between Law Enforcement and Social Work)

- Initiate a dramatic shift in mental health policies
- Create collaborative and creative efforts in finding solutions to providing mental health services, and
- Restructuring existing law enforcement policies to appropriately provide adequate mental health services

Wolff, (1998); Norton, Yoon, Domino, & Morrissey, (2006)

# What can be Expected with the Integration of Services between Law Enforcement and Social Work



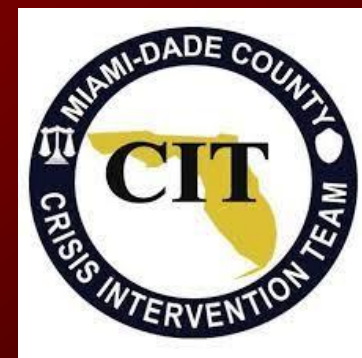
- A positive perception from both the consumers and the police officers despite the stereotypical police culture, which is suspicious of others from outside the law community
- Promising implications for future research, and
- Reinforcing the need for further collaboration between law enforcement and social work

Patterson, (2004); Young, et al., (2008)

# Specialized Training (The CIT Model)

- Was started in 1988 by the Memphis Police Department
- The training was designed to increase the officers' abilities in de-escalating and provide them with appropriate interventions specific to different mental illness presentations
- Is a collaboration of the local mental health system with great success.
- Offers police officers specialized training when dealing with the mentally ill

Teller, et al., (2006)





# Specialized Training (The CIT Model)

- It is an intensive education about mental illness and the available system of care for local police departments
- To decrease the number of inappropriate arrests through successful collaboration with the local mental health system



Teller, et al., (2006)



# Hospital Barriers in Treating the Mentally Ill

- Many individuals with severe mental illness require inpatient psychiatric services
- Mentally Ill patients often face extensive hurdles in accessing care especially because psychiatric services are not profitable for many general hospitals
- Most individuals with severe mental illness are uninsured or underinsured, with restricted coverage for inpatient care

Cunnigham, McKenzie, & Taylor, (200); Liptzin, Cottlieb, & Summergard, (2007)  
Lammers & Happell, 2003; Clarke et al., (2007)

# Hospital Barriers in Treating the Mentally Ill

- Hospitals are also limited in the number of beds for mentally ill people in crisis
- Meeting the needs of the mentally ill comprise a small percentage of hospital emergency patients



Cunnigham, McKenzie, & Taylor, (200); Liptzin, Cottlieb, & Summergard, (2007)  
Lammers & Happell, 2003; Clarke et al., (2007)

# Psychiatric Barriers

- Psychiatric help may not be readily available
- Mental health treatment is often complicated by acute psychosis, personality disorders, and aggression
- Assessment is often lengthy and is often difficult to obtain



Fallon, (2003); Broadbent, Jarman, & Berk, (2002)

# Psychiatric Barriers

- Psychiatric help may not be readily available
- Like the police officers, staff at emergency rooms often feels that they do not have adequate skills or training to meet the needs of the mentally ill individuals
- Law enforcement is often mandated to remain with the patient at the hospital until psychiatric help is available, especially if the individual has been placed in custody, hindering the police officers' ability to serve the rest of the community during their hours



Fallon, (2003); Broadbent, Jarman, & Berk, (2002)

# Managed Care Barriers



- It often invokes penalties against primary care providers who make "too many" referrals to psychiatrists, and
- The use of non-medical professionals to screen the mentally has been identified as additional impediments to providing adequate treatment to individuals in severe mental health distress who present at emergency departments

Slate et al., (2003); Miller, (1997)

***Note:***

***Collaboration between primary care providers, hospitals, and law enforcement would help address the larger systemic issues that may be at play in serving individuals with mental illness.***



# The Predicament Faced by Police Officers



- Police officers are not only the first line responders to the individuals in emotional distress but are also responsible to assess the severity of the mentally ill and their safety to self and others.
- Police Officers are also responsible for connecting the person to appropriate services available in their local area.



**Note:**  
*This is more than the average police officer is  
prepared for or trained to handle.*



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# Hard Time to be a Police Officer



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vgd5GsyLsY>

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# The Historical Role of a Police Officer and the Mentally Ill

- They have a unique and diverse role in our society with ever changing demands to meet legal regulations and social expectations
- Their perspectives and efforts are constantly questioned as increasing social diversity and societal changes change their perspectives and contexts
- They have a shared experiences with dealing with their own emotions, frequently expressing a sense of helplessness in their ability to resolve situations with the mentally ill

# The Historical Role of a Police Officer and the Mentally III

- They have deep frustration with deinstitutionalization which puts individuals with mental illness back into the communities
- Hospitalization stays are rare and short term and individuals are promptly released to the community residential group homes and families
- A continual cycle in which people with mental illness frequently end up committing criminal acts at which point they get arrested

# The Historical Role of a Police Officer and the Mentally Ill

- HIPPA regulations and rights to privacy that endanger their safety by limiting access to information about a mentally ill's persons history of violence
- Frequently being asked to check up on a person, but limiting pertinent information about the mentally ill person



# The Historical Role of a Police Officer and the Mentally Ill

- Significant public scrutiny for their actions and the liabilities when dealing with the mentally ill
- Recognizing that even though the classroom and academy training on mental illness is helpful, every mentally ill individual in crisis presents themselves differently



# Mental Health and How it is Seen by the Police Officer Today

- They recognize that there has been a significant cultural shift in the last two decades in relations to people with mental illness
- Recognizing that mental health is still a somewhat ambiguous, loose terminology that is still not fully understood
- The issue that regardless of any mental health problems, that the mentally ill should only get arrested when they commit a crime
- The belief that there is great room for improvement from all perspectives when dealing with the mentally ill

# The Historical Resistance to a Social Work Model of Collaboration with Law Enforcement



- The police organizational culture is created through organizational traditions and practices
- Any type of transformational change redirects the culture, goals and objectives of an organization, as well as requiring a shift in the style and focus of the organization



# The Historical Resistance to a Social Work Model of Collaboration with Law Enforcement

- The resistance is often demonstrated in the form that it can:
  - Influence significant organization realignment
  - Negatively impact existing policing strategies, and
  - Facilitate a moving away from traditional policing practices





## ***Note:***

***Traditional policing is a reactionary method of policing, where the police officer responds to the location of a crime after the crime has occurred.***



# Factors Needed to Facilitate a Social Work collaboration with Law Enforcement

- Shifting a police department's organizational identity
- Addressing the internal issues that prevent a collaborate with Social Work when dealing with the mentally ill

Alasadi & Askary, (2014); Canning & Found, (2015); Kuipers et al., (2014); Skalik, (2015); Kuipers et al., (2014)



# Factors Needed to Facilitate a Social Work collaboration with Law Enforcement

- Addressing and identifying the
  - Organizational culture
  - Identifying the values of the culture
  - Addressing the decision framework of the culture, and
  - Identifying the risk assessment factors that would impede developing a collaborative methodology with social workers

Alasadi & Askary, (2014); Canning & Found, (2015); Kuipers et al., (2014)  
Skalik, (2015); Kuipers et al., (2014)

# Issues in implementing Police Social Workers in Police Departments

- These issues include, but are not limited to:
  - Securing and maintaining funding for sustainability
  - The influence of civil service regulations that direct local government agencies such as police departments to require a MSW/BSW or an academic degree in a related field in addition to relevant experience
  - Police officers' concerns about the safety of civilians

# Issues in implementing Police Social Workers in Police Departments

- The influence of police unions and perceptions that police officers are being replaced by social workers or that social workers are performing police functions
- Police social work training and appropriate supervision
- The use of equipment such as police radios and unmarked police departmental vehicles by civilians; and
- Where to position police social workers within the various police department units

## ***Note:***

***Although more outcome studies are needed to assess the efficacy of police social work interventions, working through these issues can result in enhanced police social work practice.***



# Having Police Social Workers work Alongside with Law Enforcement

- Can improve community relations
- Decrease repeat calls
- Provide essential services to not only the community, but the agency itself.



# Social Workers Partner to Respond to Calls Together



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFnCgceoX2s>

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# What Do Police Officers and Social Workers Have in Common?

- Although the similarities may not be obvious, police officers have many traits in common with social workers
- Both professions are oriented toward relieving communities of the problems that make life difficult for honest, hardworking people
- Law enforcement is inherently authoritarian whereas social work is nurturing and supportive.
- Whereas police make communities safer by removing criminals from the general population, social workers make communities more harmonious by working to mend the tattered social fabric

# Thank You

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