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ALERT TOP STORY

Local law enforcement, county mental health work to address mental illness

Maddie Pfeifer

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Encouraging signs outside of a home in Albany on Friday, June 3. Mental health has become the topic of more and more conversations. Photo by Kylie Graham, Mid-Valley Media

Maddie Pfeifer

It starts with a 911 call.

Maybe someone is struggling and doesn't have anyone to talk to. Or maybe the call comes from a third party, whether friend or stranger, to report a commotion.

The latter was the case in early June, when many concerned citizens called 911 about a seemingly agitated man who **climbed a tree and wouldn't come down** in downtown Albany. What followed was hours of negotiations.

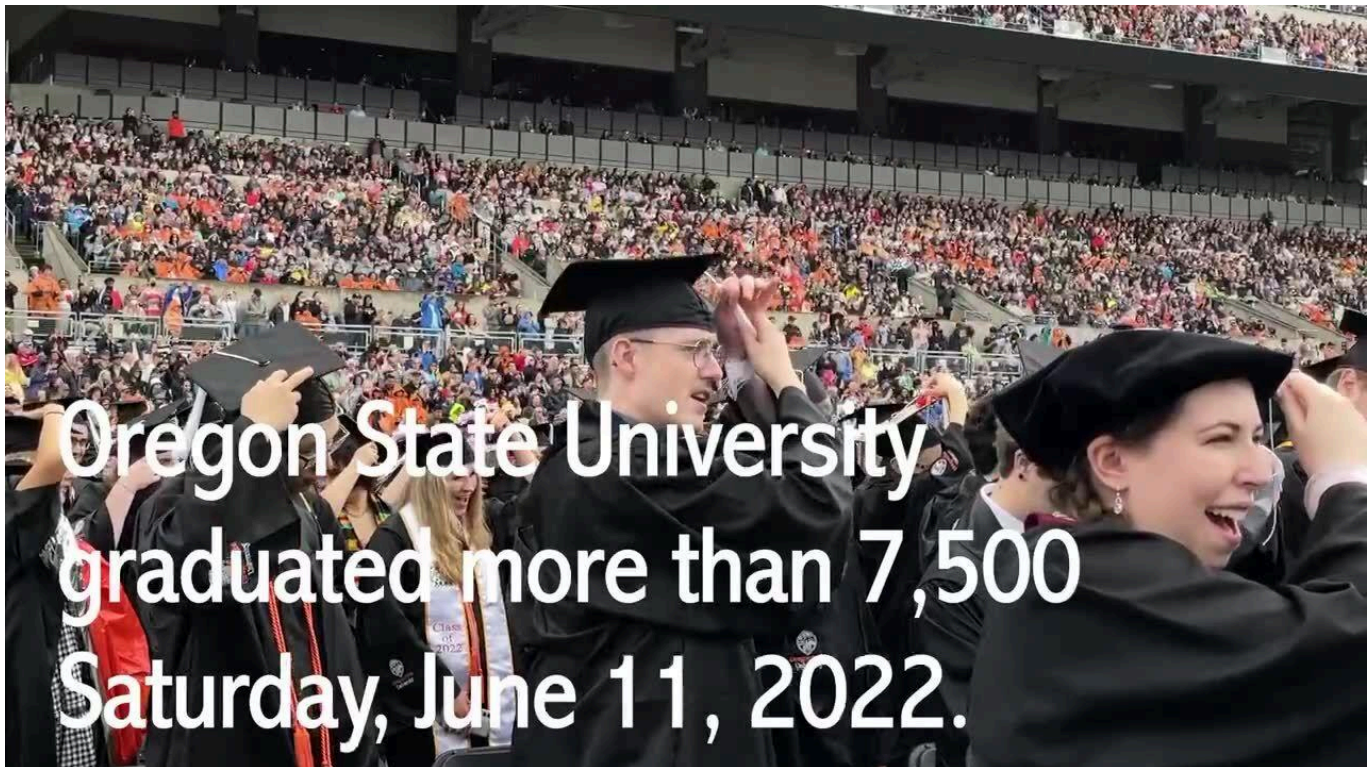
No matter who places the call, local law enforcement agencies are receiving and responding to more and more mental health-related reports. Whether law enforcement is the proper response to someone experiencing a mental health crisis, however, isn't always clear-cut.

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“It depends on what kind of mental health call because we get a wide variety of different calls, and sometimes we don't realize it's a mental health issue until after we get there,” **Linn County Sheriff Michelle Duncan** said. “Sometimes we have frequent callers, and we know that they're not necessarily a danger to themselves or others.”

With mental health-related calls on the rise, local agencies are working with county mental health organizations to address the growing crisis.



Alex Powers

It's a gray area

Law enforcement officials say it's not always clear which route — mental health or police — is appropriate. Regardless, sometimes, officers have to get involved, simply because they're often first on the scene.

“I wish we lived in that black and white world. We don't,” **Albany Police Department Chief Marcia Harnden** said. “There are people who are experiencing acute mental health crises or mental illness that are a danger to the community, and that's always going to involve us. Until there is strong infrastructure in place — crisis response centers, bolstering up crisis responding teams — we're going to continue to go to those calls.”

That's what happened when the man climbed the downtown Albany tree. Passersby thought to call police, not county mental health services. When officers arrived, negotiations proved mostly unsuccessful, according to APD, and tensions heightened as the number of spectators grew.

For people experiencing a mental health crisis, or for those witnessing someone experiencing a crisis, calling the police is a natural instinct, Benton County Sheriff's Office Capt. Chris Duffitt said. They call 911 when they don't know whom else to call.

"Law enforcement here, and I think nationally, is the first responder for really when somebody needs help," Duffitt said. "I think that law enforcement will continue to be that first responder in a lot of these calls because sometimes even if we're looking at a mental health issue, we will never know that it's a mental health-related call until we arrive."

Training takes time

Officers and deputies receive some training when it comes to responding to mental health-related calls, and local agencies are making it more of a priority.

Crisis intervention training teaches officers how to respond to people experiencing various mental illnesses and crises, such as suicidal ideation, mood disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder and more.

But such training is not available to every officer or deputy. Duncan said the Department of Public Safety Standards and Training requires one hour of crisis intervention training every year. It's up to the specific agency if they want to invest more time, and likely more money, into additional training.

"The problem is, especially in our divisions that are 24/7, I've got to take them off the road to do that or we pay overtime for them to complete that training," Duncan said. "So there's always that balance of budgets."

Duncan agrees training needs to be mandatory, but she said training is not always funded by the state, and it doesn't come cheap.

Still, although costly and time-consuming, local agencies are placing an emphasis on the training.

“Our deputies at the Benton County Sheriff's Office all have received crisis intervention training,” Duffitt said. “It's a 40-hour course that we require every deputy and new deputy to go through prior to being out on patrol, and also in our other divisions within our office to include the corrections deputies and the parole probation deputies.”

In Corvallis, the training also is becoming more of a priority. As of May, around 70% of Corvallis Police Department's sworn officers had completed it, according to Officer Trevor Anderson.

“They're trained fairly well on responding to mental health crises — they get quite a bit of training,” Anderson said. “Our chief is looking to train 100% of our staff. We're committed to that, but it's kind of a moving target as officers retire and we get new officers on. We try to run at least one CIT class a year.

“Our goal is two a year, if possible, but COVID threw a wrench in that. So we're trying to ramp back up on that.”

Corvallis Police Department was recently selected as one of three departments in the country to pilot a crisis response and intervention training. The program is backed by the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance.

“Local agencies have been training on crisis response techniques for many years, but this new program represents a more inclusive approach to issues like substance abuse and intellectual and developmental disabilities,” a news release from the city said.

Marilyn Marker, chair for National Alliance on Mental Illness Mid-Valley's advisory committee, said the local branch has participated in some of the crisis intervention training with local police. Marker said these sessions are key for law enforcement officials to understand how to communicate with someone who may be experiencing a mental health crisis.

“We go and tell our stories as either a family member or as a peer with experience with mental illness or with their family member and sort of put a face on what it's like to have a family member with an illness,” Marker said. “We talk about what has worked for them and, if they've had experiences with law enforcement, what has been positive and what hasn't worked so well.”

Marker emphasized that approaching someone in crisis with a calm attitude and listening to them is crucial, and the training is a great way to learn these skills.

But even when there's a will, the way is not always easy. At the Albany Police Department, **staffing shortages** make it particularly difficult to get officers this training.

“Our goal here is to have all of our sworn officers trained in crisis intervention training within the next five years,” Harnden said. “That's a huge lift considering how short-staffed we are, and it's difficult.”

The man in the Albany tree, about two stories high, reportedly was experiencing mental health problems. Whether or not the responding officers had the necessary training to handle the situation is unknown. What is known is that it took about three hours to coax the man to come down on his own.

Current protocol

After a call comes in to 911 call centers, what follows may involve police, county health services or a combination of both. Regardless, agencies across the board say they're seeing more calls involving mental-health at least in some capacity.

In Corvallis, that's happening “at least weekly, and probably more frequently than that,” Duffitt said.

In the Linn County Sheriff's jurisdiction, Duncan said there have been around 80 such calls since Jan. 1, not including those that are later identified as mental health-related calls.

Albany police Dispatcher Christopher Johnson estimated about a third of all calls have some sort of mental health component.

“I think coming out of COVID, we're experiencing people struggling with more and more mental health issues on various levels of various degrees,” Harnden said.

The dispatcher’s first task is to determine whether there is a criminal component to a mental health-related report. It’s all about getting the most information possible before sending someone out to the scene, dispatchers say.

“We are looking for immediate threats of harm, past history and taking into account all information to determine if law enforcement needs to get involved now or later,” Johnson said.

The information gathering continues once officers arrive at the scene, utilizing everything they learned through training.

“It involves active listening and trying to gather clues about what this person is going through, and how we can best help them,” Duffitt said. “If available, we'll get a hold of Benton County Behavioral Health and ask them to respond as well. That usually isn't until after we've already made contact with somebody, and we've put this information together, so we can seek assistance from them.”

As officers or deputies assess the situation, they are tasked with figuring out next steps. Duncan said Linn County deputies focus on reducing tensions.

“Our staff do such a good job at de-escalating these situations that our use of force is extremely low,” Duncan said. “We're talking them into wanting to go to the hospital, we're talking them into de-escalating the issue or to stop the crime that they're committing.”

But if someone is actively committing a crime or is endangering themselves or those around them, police must intervene, agency leaders said.

This is why police responded to the man in the tree. He was eventually arrested on suspicion of disorderly conduct and criminal mischief.

“Obviously, when we respond to a call where somebody is a danger to themselves or somebody else, we have an obligation to take action and that of making sure that somebody doesn't harm themselves or somebody,” Duffitt said. “So what we have in Oregon is a peace officer hold or a peace officer custody so we're able to take somebody into custody and transport them to the hospital where they can get the help that they need.”

Working with the county

The local police and sheriff's offices have formed relationships with their respective county mental health services to better address those in crisis. In many cases, a dual response is most effective.

“We try to work collaboratively with them as much as possible. Knowing that we're the ones who are typically going to respond first to these calls, we try to use them as much as we can,” Duffitt said. “And that goes beyond even just our patrol response. If somebody gets arrested for a crime, and they get taken to our jail, then County Behavioral Health is contacted to help these people as much as they're able to, granted that the person wants to speak with somebody from Behavioral Health.”

Both law enforcement and county mental health officials agree that a working relationship is key.

“We have a great partnership and collaboration with our county agencies so far,” Benton County Behavioral Health Program Manager Eric Bowling said. “We have to work together to meet our community's needs.”

Benton County Behavioral Health wants to ensure people and their actions aren't criminalized, Bowling said, when mental health issues are truly the driving force behind the actions that spurred the calls for help.

Meeting people where they're at is at the core of the county's partnership with police, Bowling said. The focus is on providing the best care possible at that specific moment in time.

"I've been doing this for quite a number of years, and I started the program in Linn County," Bowling said. "I've seen the good that can come from these programs and the impact on the community."

In Albany, **Kiersten Glaeser's role with** Linn County Mental Health is a direct sign of collaboration between county and police.

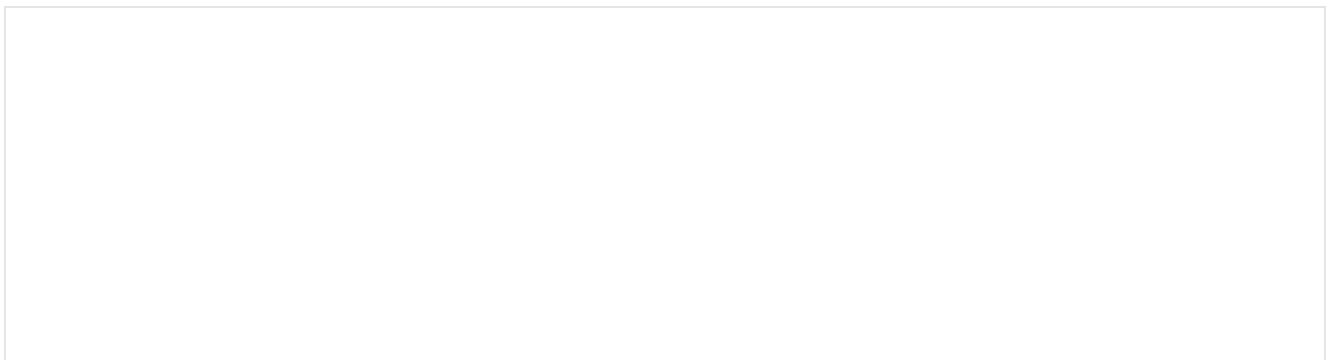
"She's been a huge asset," Harnden said. "She follows up on cases, and she makes sure she can follow the individual through the healthcare system and try to guide them towards resources."

Harnden added that Glaeser never seems to have a day off.

Officials at Linn County Mental Health say their relationship with law enforcement is crucial in getting someone the proper care.

"I think that mental health gives a different lens and helps people struggling with mental illness. We're all trained, we're all master's level folks," Nova Sweet, Linn County mental health crisis response team supervisor, said. They're able to "look at things from a mental health perspective versus a safety perspective."

Tanya Thompson, mental health program manager, said her office works closely with local agencies, especially Albany PD. She meets with the agency often to discuss community-wide issues regarding mental health.



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When jail is the only option

If someone is experiencing a mental health crisis while committing a crime, they may end up with a citation and possibly a visit to jail.

That was the case with the man in the tree earlier this month. After Albany police safely talked him down, he was taken to Samaritan Albany General Hospital where he was evaluated and cleared by mental health prior to being taken to jail.

But is jail the right place for someone in crisis? The answer, again, isn't always obvious.

“The jail is the right place for somebody who's committed crimes,” Duffitt said. “And sometimes that is people who are mentally ill.”

It isn't always the most ideal place, law enforcement officials all seem to agree, but it is often the only option. Someone may be experiencing a crisis or living with a mental illness, but that doesn't necessarily mean they aren't guilty of committing a crime.

"If they're committing a person's crime, a major felony crime, those people are going to have to go to jail, and not all mental illnesses preclude the ability to be culpable in a crime," Duncan said. "But for those kinds of smaller crimes, there's potential for going down a mental health path."

The severity of the alleged crime will often determine whether or not someone will end up in jail. Officers must figure out intent and motive, whether the mental health crisis is the "core motivator of the behavior," Corvallis PD's Anderson said.

Landing in jail doesn't mean someone will stay there. In regards to the man who climbed the tree in Albany, Linn County Mental Health was working with the man's probation officer to get him out of jail and into a psychiatric facility, according to Albany police.

While housing a person experiencing a mental health crisis is not ideal, the mid-Willamette Valley doesn't have a lot of options, according to officials. Hospital and **jail beds are hard to come by** in both counties, and there's no crisis center fit to handle the local demand.

"If mental health issues or mental illness is driving criminal behavior, there should be options other than just the traditional criminal justice system," Harnden said.

The hope is to have more options in the future. For now, agencies are considering trying out what is known as the Yellow Line Project. It aims to provide more resources to those experiencing mental health crises and to avoid taking them to jail if possible. Duncan said she's working with the District Attorney's Office and other agencies to potentially implement this project in Linn County.

“It would only be for some of the smaller crimes where there's a mental health component to it, but if there's a way that we can get them back on the path of mental health treatment, when that's really the issue instead of taking them to jail — which doesn't necessarily solve the problem for them or the community — that's the intent,” Duncan said.

The individual would have to commit to a roughly two-month-long program of mental health treatment. Law enforcement would work with county mental health to determine how much progress the individual is making. If they are showing positive growth and complying with treatment, the police or sheriff's office won't send over the charges to be filed with the District Attorney's Office for prosecution.

These would only be for minor cases, such as trespass, Duncan said.

“I think everybody can agree that sometimes for those people, the criminal path is not the best place for them,” she said. “My goal would be to work with mental health and other partners.”

Harnden likes the idea, though she's unsure if the county has the infrastructure to support the program at this time.

Finding what works

If there's one thing all agencies seem to agree on, it's that what works for one community may not work for another.

In Corvallis, a pilot program known as the **Crisis Outreach Response and Engage team**, or CORE, tries to resolve tense situations without jail. The team consists of Anderson and Alyssa Giesbrecht of county Behavioral Health.

“I think we've seen a lot of successes over the past nine months or so, and I really think that it's filling a need in the community,” Anderson said. “We've got quite a few success stories already, but the biggest thing I'm seeing is it's really breaking down silos between service providers, because the line of communication between law enforcement and county health has never been better.”

While Corvallis PD has seen success with its pilot program, a designated crisis response team isn't necessarily a viable option for other agencies.

The Linn County Sheriff's Office, Duncan said, can't even entertain the idea of a program like that until she gets staffing levels up.

"We can talk about all these programs that we want to implement and things we want to do, but until I have the staff just to take the calls that are out there now, I can't even look at those things," she said.

For the Benton County Sheriff's Office, Duffitt said maintaining that relationship with county behavioral health is key.

"I think that continuing to work collaboratively and having the contact information and the ability to contact our Benton County Behavioral Health is what is the most important and being able to work together to solve some of these issues related to the crisis we face in that way," Duffitt said.

In Albany, Harnden sought help from the City Council, seeking approval of a new mental health related position for the Police Department. In a memo sent to the council in late May, Harnden asked for the creation of a full-time mental health intervention specialist, effective July 1. The position would be a combined effort between police, fire, parks and recreation and library departments, according to the memo.

On June 8, **the city council unanimously approved the new position.**

"The goal of this position is to provide assessment and treatment services; crisis intervention and treatment services, including intensive services, to individuals with complex needs and diagnoses; and develop and implement specific services in the community," the memo says.

The specialist will respond to mental health calls, not unlike the man in the tree, as well as provide follow-up to cases. In the memo, Albany fire Chief Shane Wooton, Parks and Recreation Director Kim Lyddane and Library Director Eric Ikenouye all offered their support for the new position.

Stretched thin

Law enforcement aren't the only agencies experiencing short-staffing. Resources are stretched thin in both counties' mental health departments and in the private sector.

One of the problems Marker said she's seen while working for National Alliance on Mental Illness is the difficulties getting an appointment with a mental health professional.

"It takes a really long time to get an appointment unless it's really an emergency," Marker said. "It can take up to six months to get an appointment with a psychiatrist in town."

Thompson said Linn County Mental Health is working on getting fully staffed. Until then, it's hard for the crisis response team to get out to other parts of Linn County, such as Lebanon and Sweet Home, in a timely manner.

"We would absolutely love to have a full workforce," Sweet said. "For crisis mobile, we'd like to be able to respond to all of Linn County, within 15 to 45 minutes depending on where we're going in Linn County."

Although infrastructure and resources may not be solidified, agency personnel have hopes for the future and are actively trying to improve the situation, whether that be through pilot programs, new initiatives or simply starting the conversation.

"I think more mental health resources, and more available mental health resources would be extremely beneficial to the people of Benton County and in Oregon in general," Duffitt said. "Dealing with increased calls related to mental health crises, ... it would definitely be reasonable to think that more mental health resources would better the community."

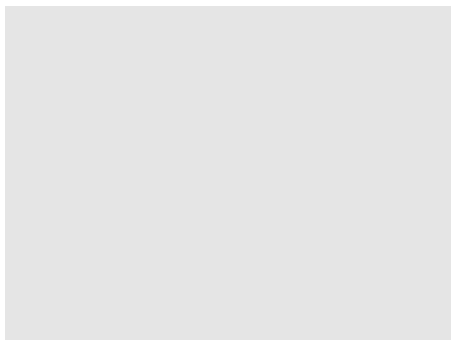
Corvallis PD hopes to grow its CORE team in the future and looks forward to eventually having an alternative to jail and the hospital, Anderson said.

“Neither place is really built for addressing mental health issues, and the emergency room is better equipped to handle broken arms, chest pains, physical illness versus mental health issues. And a jail is meant to house people that have committed crimes, not necessarily someone that is suffering from mental illness,” he said.

Duncan would like to see a county crisis center dedicated to addressing mental health related cases.

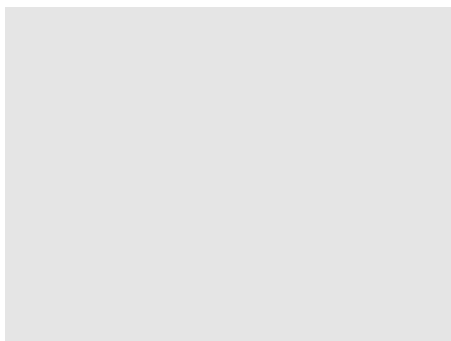
“It's not going to be a short-term goal, but I would really love to see Linn County get some kind of crisis resource center that is a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week center that somehow would be staffed with some crisis workers,” Duncan said. “We can still have some place to take them to de-escalate.”

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Albany Police Chief Marcia Harnden.

Mark Ylen Mid-Valley Media



Trevor Anderson

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