Responding to Persons with Mental Illness: Perceptions from Virginia Deputies

Submitted to Virginia Sheriff

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Most recently, mental illness in Virginia has become one of the most public issues facing law enforcement. Last November’s incident involving Senator Creigh Deeds and his son prompted the Virginia Sheriff’s Association (VSA) to take a leading role in engaging the General Assembly and Governor McAuliffe to support legislation to help those with mental illness and to help ensure public safety. Unfortunately, little is still known about the effects of training on deputies as they continue to face interactions and often conflicts with Persons with Mental Illness (hereafter PWMI). The purpose of this research was to attempt to provide some feedback to Sheriff’s Offices across the state as they attempt to determine the need for training deputies in working with PWMI. Specifically, this study, as part of a larger study on mental illness in Virginia, was designed to determine if deputies in Virginia feel prepared to serve as first responders to an incident involving PWMI.

Today’s law enforcement officers frequently find themselves in the role of first responders to situations involving PWMI. Current calls for service have suggested that these types of calls will only increase (Cooper, McLearen & Zapf, 2004). Explanations for this increase in police involvement with PWMI include the deinstitutionalization of state psychiatric hospitals and gaps in community mental health service providers (New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003). Therefore, the training of deputies to respond to PWMI is critical. This training not only supports the agency’s ability to respond to cases involving PWMI, but also (hopefully) reduces the risk of injury to all parties involved.

Historically, research has suggested that often law enforcement is unsure about what to do in situations involving PWMI (Wells & Schafer, 2006; Hails & Borum, 2003). Through
exposure to PWMI training, it is suggested that deputies will feel more confident in their actions and will be better able to diffuse situations with PWMI that may escalate to violence.

The sample for this study was 72 deputies in the state of Virginia having between 6 months to 43 years of experience. All of these deputies completed a survey on PWMI which included the question “How prepared did you feel when dealing with your most recent situation involving a PWMI?” The demographics of deputies participating in this study varied.

Results of the survey indicated that 14 (20%) had less than 3 years of experience and 11 (16%) had over 20 years of law enforcement experience. Almost all of the deputies (92%) had responded to at least one call involving a PWMI within the last 12 months; however, only 40 (61%) felt prepared for their response.

When attempting to determine if demographics of the PWMI were related to perceptions of preparedness for the deputies, neither sex, race, or age of the PWMI impacted their feelings of preparedness for the response. However, one demographic characteristic of the deputies was related to their perceptions of preparedness. This demographic was years of experience in law enforcement. Deputies with fewer years of experience were more likely to report feelings of preparedness or comfort than the more seasoned deputies. This result was, for the most part, assumed to be related to training.

At first glance, the simple results of this survey seemed contradictory. However, when considering the changes in law enforcement training over the past few years, this increase in comfort in responding to situation with PWMI for the less experienced deputies seems reasonable. Over the past few years, training academies throughout the state have made increasing efforts to address responding situations involving a PWMI. In addition, local offices have also begun to address PWMI through training their deputies.
Although research has suggested that it is difficult to determine whether training given to recruits for responding to PWMI is adequate in any absolute sense (Hails & Borum, 2003), this study suggests that the current training of deputies does provide them some sense of security in their actions in responding to calls involving PWMI. The impact of Virginia’s training for deputies is yet to be assessed; however, on the surface, it appears as though the recent effort of training for deputies in response to PWMI is significant in terms of positive impact in the Sheriff’s Offices within the state of Virginia.
References


