

Calif. Training Program Focuses On Mentally Ill

BY SEAN WEBBY SWEBBY@MERCURYNEWS.COM
SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS (CALIFORNIA)

The Santa Clara County-based creators of a new interactive video simulation hope it will teach officers how to deal with the mentally ill in a way that neither the officer nor the person ends up hurt

Created: December 5, 2011

Whereas a Wii game may teach someone to master the Super Mario Brothers' quest to rescue Princess Peach, the Santa Clara County-based creators of a new interactive video simulation hope it will teach officers how to deal with the mentally ill in a way that neither the officer nor the person ends up hurt -- or worse.

This is no game.

On the video screen a fraught father watches as his mentally ill young son, off his medication and convinced police are secretly monitoring his every move, lurches unsteadily from a lawn chair to loudly confront an officer.

What happens next? Does the young man end up arrested, in a psychiatric hospital? Does he end up dead?

The different answers to that question have been electronically built into a new and nationally unique interactive video simulation program created for law enforcement by the county mental health department and unveiled at a presentation Friday.

As the officers react to the scenarios -- a veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder scaring people in a park, a girl making suicidal posts on Facebook and others -- the realities change, prompted by a trainer at a computer behind the scenes. Afterward the officers and their trainers discuss what happened and what didn't. The key, the program's creators say, is to defuse the situation and avoid violence.

"We are going to save lives with this," promised Patrick Dwyer, a retired Palo Alto police chief who now serves as the county's mental health liaison with law enforcement and helped create the program.

In hopes of that, agencies are lining up to include the video simulations into their officers' training programs. The Palo Alto Police Department will be the first. The Santa Clara County Sheriff's department and San Jose police are expected to join.

It's a problematic issue that touches on police use of force, costly litigation and the humane treatment of the mentally ill. In Fullerton, two police officers are facing criminal charges for allegedly beating to death an unarmed mentally ill homeless man this summer. San Jose police have come under heavy scrutiny after officers shot and killed several mentally ill people in recent years, including a man in the foothills who told police he didn't believe they had bullets in their guns. In a different case in 2009, officers responding to Daniel Pham's knife attack on his brother shot the mentally ill man in his back yard, leading to community protests.

Dwyer declined to say if he thinks the newly enhanced training would have saved the lives in those cases.

But he said that law enforcement agencies clearly need to augment and add to their training on how to deal with the mentally ill.

According to Dwyer, 10 percent to 15 percent of a police officer's time is spent dealing with mentally ill people having a crisis, but the average amount of training time for many of those officers adds up to only a tiny fraction of their instruction.

Retired San Jose Police Sgt. Dave Newman played out the scenarios, calmly talking to the video screen at the sheriff's training center, reassuring the "sims" that he was there to help them, not hurt them.

No laser guns were drawn, no "shots" were fired as is usually found in the "Shoot/Don't Shoot" scenarios in the force options simulation videos used by law enforcement. These videos all end happily.

Senate President pro Tempore Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, said he was impressed at the video and other innovations aimed at reducing both the injuries to the mentally ill, but also unnecessary incarceration and stigma. Steinberg was a co-author of the Mental Health Act of 2004, which has increased funding, personnel and other resources to support county mental health programs.

Copyright 2011 San Jose Mercury News All Rights Reserved



Do you recommend this news?

READ MORE: [Training \(/search/training:389/v\)](#), [Social Issues \(/search/social-issues:377/v\)](#), [Training \(/search/training:2160/v\)](#)

comments powered by **DISQUS** (<http://disqus.com>)

(http://oascentral.officer.com/RealMedia/ads/click_lx.ads/www.officer.com/news/10467522/calif-training-program-focuses-on-mentally-ill/762275541/x36/default/empty.gif/50367472416b37655a707741432f792b?x) (http://oascentral.officer.com/RealMedia/ads/click_lx.ads/www.officer.com/news/10467522/calif-training-program-focuses-on-mentally-ill/281821540/x37/default/empty.gif/50367472416b37655a707741432f792b?x)