

Some Hudson Valley police agencies are prioritizing mental health assistance. Here's how.

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Michael Herry is nervous as he sees a police van park nearby.

The 57-year-old Black man is standing with a group of friends in the City of Poughkeepsie-owned Garden Street parking lot on a Monday morning.

As Herry watches to see who comes out of the van, he sees a man in plain clothes he recognizes: Linwood Burke, a behavioral health specialist.

Two uniformed city police officers also exit the van. Still, Herry feels himself relax.

Burke handed Herry a business card the last time they spoke, but he lost it. When he left a homeless shelter at the Dutchess County Jail to stay with a friend, some of his belongings had been thrown away, including the card.

Herry has been homeless for five years. He struggles from a bipolar disorder. On his bad days, he isolates himself and doesn't want to speak with others. This is a good day.

He finds comfort in speaking to Burke. But Herry continues to struggle to advocate for himself and follow through pursuing the social services Burke suggests, which could help him with his mental health and housing instability.

“It’s hard for me because I am so used to being quiet,” Herry said. “I gotta break that wall. The only time I really get to talk is when I’m drinking. But other than that, I’m quiet as a mouse. I have a lot of other issues going on. It’s hard for me to talk about, and that’s why I need mental health help.”



City of Poughkeepsie Police lieutenant Damon Brodhead and Mental Health America behavioral health specialist Linwood Burke talk with a man who was with a large group of people in a parking lot off Main Street in the City of Poughkeepsie on November 23, 2020. *Patrick Oehler/Poughkeepsie Journal*

The officers, Sgt. Jason Deigan and Lt. Damon Brodhead, greet his friends and ask how they are doing. One woman tells them she found housing, but still took a bus to hang out with the group, most of whom remain homeless. Another man stands against a fence; he says he doesn't trust the officers.

Burke holds a clipboard and takes notes as he talks to one of Herry's friends.

"The unfortunate thing is, a lot of times with people, they don't always want help," he said. "They trust what they trust out here. But we see that after multiple interactions with individuals, they may open up a little each time."

Burke joined the Poughkeepsie police department in September through his job with Mental Health America of Dutchess County.

Like most departments, city police had, for years, responded to reported disturbances with officers, regardless of the potential criminality of the report, or the mental health background and needs of those involved. Seeking a better way to intervene and diffuse those situations — or prevent them from happening entirely through regular check-ins — the city created funding in its budget to bring on someone with experience and training, the depth of which police academies do not yet offer.

Aside from the weekly beat patrol rides, Burke may be asked by other officers to join them in responding to any mental health-related call, including those involving substance abuse or other interpersonal crises. He said he does not respond to any crime-related calls.

The pilot program was birthed as advocates across the country have touted the importance of supporting the community holistically and funding for programs outside of police departments.

Deadly incidents involving police, such as Daniel Prude's March 2020 death in Rochester, highlighted the need to reassess how police across the country respond to individuals in mental distress, to reduce the chance of escalation to violence.

Poughkeepsie is not the first department to launch such a program and more may follow soon amid statewide police reform. Departments have an April 1 deadline to submit plans in order to obtain state aid, according to Gov. Andrew Cuomo's Executive Order 203. Improving mental health response is a major component of many drafts that have been submitted.

There are two other active programs in the Hudson Valley. White Plains police have had a mental health unit for about 13 years. The New Rochelle Police Department's community resource coordinator works with a mental health behavioral specialist.

Other organizations have incorporated mental health response broadly in other ways, such as using a mental health helpline in concert with traditional 911. Orange County makes a mobile mental health response team available to each of its departments. Advocates, though, say it helps to have the response ingrained into individual police agencies.

Funding is a hurdle for some. The Kingston Police Department said it's interested in adding mental health workers, but there isn't room in the budget.



White Plains Public Safety Mental Outreach Team

The White Plains Public Safety Mental Outreach Team is now in its 13th year providing help to those in need. *Mark Vergari, Rockland/Westchester Journal News*

Milder Belacazar-Vorperian, the social worker who works with White Plains police, is paid by the Westchester County Department of Community Mental Health. Burke's salary comes from both the police department and Mental Health America of Dutchess County.

Shannon Wong, director of the Hudson Valley Chapter of the New York Civil Liberties Union, said research shows mental health treatment in general is underfunded and has not been prioritized by local or federal governments.

"We should be thinking of shifting funds so there's a robust community and civilian response to mental health," she said. "Because police are not mental health counselors."

A couple times a week, Burke, Deigan and Brodhead patrol Poughkeepsie's Main Street corridor in the marked van. Burke, dressed professionally, always is the first to approach individuals, most of whom are homeless. Uniformed police can make some, like Herry, anxious, potentially escalating the interaction to something combative. That's true not only of those the group meets on the street, but also residents in general and people of color specifically, when being visited by police.

"I'm not naive," Burke said. "This is the real world. When we go out and about, especially in a big white van with the City of Poughkeepsie police on the side, everybody sees it. We know sometimes we are walking up on people when they're not at their best. We always explain that we are not here to make an arrest. This is about us going out and seeing people that are in need."



Mental Health America behavioral health specialist Linwood Burke speaks with a client while doing a ride along with the City of Poughkeepsie Police Department on November 23, 2020. *Patrick Oehler/Poughkeepsie Journal*

In addition to visits with people, sometimes in their residence, sometimes on street corners, Burke checks in on individuals he's contacted by phone to ensure they are following up on services they've previously discussed.

Burke has a database of individuals he has encountered on the streets. When the trio is patrolling, they search for people who may be sleeping in a public space or someone they've met in a past encounter. Burke can monitor if someone is putting in the work, from finding housing to seeking help with substance or drug abuse.

Why it's needed

Det. Lt. Thierry Croizer said he is jealous of Poughkeepsie. The Kingston officer wishes Ulster County had the resources to embed a mental health worker in the department. Offering mental health support is important to Croizer; early in his career, a friend who was a fellow officer died of suicide.

Croizer is a state instructor for the Crisis Intervention Team Training Program and a master instructor for the state office for mental health. He teaches other officers how to train recruits in their regional police academies.

Recruits who graduate from a state-offered police academy receive a minimum of 20 training hours specific to responding to someone in crisis. Officials say this training has increased awareness, prompting more discourse between police and mental health agencies.

Croizer said when he first started in the 1980s, a response to a person acting strange, distraught or screaming in the street would have resulted in a disorderly conduct arrest. Today, officers are trained to talk to them first.

"Maybe this individual doesn't need to go to jail," he said. "Maybe this individual needs to speak to someone. Maybe this individual needs to be directed to another resource that might alleviate what they're upset about."

However, Wong said people are better serviced when they receive help from civilian-led models with a primary goal of serving and understanding the needs of people in crisis. Courses offered to police "by no means goes far enough."

"If I took some self-defense courses," she said, "that doesn't mean I'm now qualified to defend all."

Jeff Clark, the statewide director of SNUG street outreach, said someone going through a mental health crisis is more likely to be receptive if they are approached by a specialist or social worker.

"The social worker may be armed with more verbal cues to bring that person down, as opposed to a police officer," Clark said.

SNUG, guns spelled backward, is a gun violence response organization created through the state Division of Criminal Justice Services. There are Hudson Valley chapters in the cities of Poughkeepsie and Newburgh. The organization hires outreach workers who understand the complexities of the neighborhood.

Clark was a police officer for 26 years in Rochester before taking his position with SNUG. Anytime someone is shot, SNUG responds. He said while SNUG employees aren't dispatched to mental health responses, they do have social workers who connect with at-risk individuals.

"I think, in many of the cities, if you discuss it with their police, they would be the first to tell you that there's people that our outreach staff can reach that they're not going to be able to have a conversation on the streets," Clark said.

White Plains Police Chief Joseph Castelli said there aren't statistics showing the impact of their crisis intervention mental health outreach team, or if it has led to fewer arrests. It's hard to gauge with certainty if an arrest involved an individual with a mental illness.



White Plains Police Detectives Fred Cianci and Joseph Palmiotto along with social worker Milder Belalcazar-Vorperian, chat with Irma Douglas as she sits in the cold weather near White Plains city hall, Feb. 17, 2021. They are part of the crisis intervention team for the department. *Mark Vergari/The Journal News*

"But, anecdotally, we can say there are people that we receive calls on all the time," Castelli said. "There are people we will receive calls on when people go off their medicine. We will engage in helping."

Thomas Pape, City of Poughkeepsie police chief, told the city's Common Council on March 1 that Burke is an asset to the department.

"I only wish that we had done this sooner," Pape said. "We now have somebody in house that we can turn over a problem that we can't solve to, and it gets followed up on and there's actual closure to it rather than just moving on to the next, you know, tragedy."

How the programs work

The goal of the Poughkeepsie, White Plains and New Rochelle programs is to form connections in the community, reduce the number of unnecessary arrests and inform individuals of wellness services available to them.

Burke works under the department's Juvenile Division, alongside the division's youth worker, and with the Behavioral Evaluation and Assistance Team.

Westchester County funds the specialist's position in New Rochelle. The specialist, Mary Manchand, has an office is in city hall, but she will respond to calls police and conduct necessary follow-ups, said Capt. Cosmo Costa, police spokesperson.



White Plains Police Detectives Joseph Palmiotto and Fred Cianci flank social worker Milder Belalcazar-Vorperian, as they chat outside of the Police Headquarters, Feb. 17, 2021. They are part of the crisis intervention team for the department. *Mark Vergari/The Journal News*

Belacazar-Vorperian, a social worker as part of the White Plains crisis intervention mental health outreach team, works with Dets. Fred Cianci and Joseph Palmioto five days a week.

The unit reports to Capt. James Spencer, who called the team a resource to other first responders and "for people who are struggling."

Officers review police reports daily and, if there was an interaction that appears to have a mental health component, it will be forwarded to the team to follow up.

"The social worker is invaluable," Spencer said. "She has different resources where she can look into her database to see if someone is already connected to services."

Irma Douglas, a White Plains resident, said many people need that help. She spoke to the team on Feb 17.

"You do as much as you can but it's up to me to find the place," Douglas said to Belacazar-Vorperian. "You cannot be holding my hand here and sit and crying."



Irma Douglas, alone with her belongings, sits in the cold weather near White Plains city hall, Feb. 17, 2021. *Mark Vergari/The Journal News*

Castelli estimates the number of calls "for potential people in crisis" increased during the pandemic. What may be 300 calls in a given year jumped to 700 to 900.

What other mental health assistance is available

The Westchester department of health established a network recently of its clinicians to be on call for other police departments to contact for guidance on responding to individual incidents.

Glazer said the county's crisis team "works from criminal justice and court referrals to provide connection and follow-up for individuals who have experienced criminal justice involvement."

At times, the team has embedded a staff member with the Greenburgh Police Department, as it has a large population, Glazer said.

Rockland County partners with the Behavioral Health Response Team, a mobile behavioral health service and crisis intervention team that exists 24/7.



From left, Mental Health America behavioral health specialist Linwood Burke, City of Poughkeepsie Police lieutenant Damon Brodhead, sergeant Jason Deigan talk with a person sleeping in Mural Square in the City of Poughkeepsie on November 23, 2020. *Patrick Oehler/Poughkeepsie Journal*

In addition to its Crisis Stabilization Team, Dutchess started a 24-hour Stabilization Center for individuals seeking help for mental health and substance abuse issues. Dutchess also, at the start of this year, moved its crisis helpline to the same area in which it receives its 911 calls, to better allow the operators for the lines to work together.

Darcie M. Miller, commissioner of Orange County's departments of social services and mental health, said a mobile mental health response team is available to assist all 32 police departments in the county.

Officers responding to a call can call the team to a scene if they do not believe they can effectively intervene. The team also follows up on reports from departments.

Tammy Rhein, Orange County's director of chemical dependency, assists its police academy with crisis intervention training, and sits on a crisis intervention training committee.

She said officers, even police chiefs, reach out more proactively once trained.

"That's one of the things that really comes out in the training a lot, too, is they learn what's available in the community," she said. "They don't have to be experts or memorize any of that but they're in awe, I think at times, and really surprised at the plethora of resources that are available in the community to help people, including family and peers themselves."

A possible indication of success

Though Castelli said there are not statistics to depict success of the White Plains program, Nada Khader, executive director at Explore WESPAC, points to one data set presented by Castelli himself.

WESPAC is a nearly 50-year-old organization that works toward progressive social change in Westchester. Khader said she has served on two advisory groups related to the White Plains department. Most recently, she is serving on the White Plains municipal task force for police reform.



White Plains Police Detective Joseph Palmiotto drives as social worker Milder Belalcazar-Vorperian sits in the back as they canvas the streets, Feb. 17, 2021. They are part of the crisis intervention team for the department. *Mark Vergari/The Journal News*

Khader said it's important to understand a significant number of people are killed in police-involved shootings across the country.

"Between 1,000 to 1,500 civilians every year lose their lives to police shootings and approximately a third of those deaths involve service calls that involve a mental health situation," Khader said. "In the City of White Plains, our statistics are actually quite good."

Citing Castelli's statistics, there were just two years in the past decade in which the department reported an incident in which a gun was used by an officer. However, one of the gun-involved incidents resulted in the Nov. 19, 2011 killing of Kenneth Chamberlain Sr., a 68-year-old Marine Corps veteran and retired correction officer.

He was killed about an hour after accidentally triggering his medical-alert device. When police broke down his door and tried to subdue him, he insisted he was fine, but became agitated and thrust a knife at them.

"I think to have almost no one use their gun in that many years is significant," Khader said. "It does give a sense of emphasis that people are putting the police leadership or putting on de-escalation and resolving situations without using as much force as possible."

Progress in Poughkeepsie

Driving south on Main Street, Burke, Deigan and Brodhead locate Karen Brooks, who they have met with often. As she is walking north toward the van, Lt. Deigan turns right into a parking lot behind an Internal Revenue Service office.

"She's done a complete 180 in her life," Deigan says.

Broadhead quickly adds, "I think she's done a 540."



From left, City of Poughkeepsie Police Lieutenant Damon Brodhead and Mental Health America behavioral health specialist Linwood Burke talk with Karen Brooks while in the City of Poughkeepsie on November 23, 2020. *Patrick Oehler/Poughkeepsie Journal*

Burke checked his database before they headed out to see that her case manager attempted to contact her and contacted Lexington Center for Recovery, a rehabilitation center to help individuals with their substance abuse.

"If she's still engaged with Lexington, they can assist her with filling out an application for housing," Burke said. "She needs to be engaged though."

The team greets Brooks with smiles and Burke asks how she's doing and why she hasn't called her case manager back. She's had problems connecting. Burke hands her another business card to contact them.

Everyone says their goodbyes and the team discusses their next move

"I believe every police force should have this," Burke said. "This is the real world, this is what's happening... Poughkeepsie police know that there's some things that they just don't have the resources or skill set to help some people, to an extent. It's a great team and Poughkeepsie is at the front of this as something they wanted.

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