

Team Two

A Training for Law Enforcement, Mental Health Crisis Workers and other First Responders

When a mental health crisis arises, whether it is within a family home, at a high school or in a public place, it is critical that the first responders are trained in mental health issues, in mental health law and in working together to resolve the crisis. Team Two seeks to both educate the first responder and to build the relationships necessary to working together in crisis. The training provides an overview of relevant mental health statutes and a refresher on mandatory law enforcement mental health training (ACT 80). Three different scenarios are presented in break out sessions with local teams of police, dispatchers and mobile crisis workers where specifics of response to the scenarios are discussed in detail. Small groups report back to the entire group to hear feedback and discuss strategies. A short video on law enforcement response to situations involving persons on the autism spectrum is shown and discussed. Participants learn from a panel presentation which includes a person with mental illness or a family member, a crisis clinician and a law enforcement officer who all share personal stories. Additionally, the audience hears about resources in their particular regions. This collaborative grant between the Department of Mental Health and the Department of Public Safety is overseen by Vermont Care Partners.

The training is offered in five regions around the state because of the different resources available in different parts of the state. What's available in Bennington, for example, may not be available in Lamoille County. There are several different types of crisis response teams in Chittenden County, while in Orange County, the same team of crisis clinicians will respond to a crisis involving a child, an elderly person, a person with intellectual disabilities or a person with a mental illness.

Team Two participants have expressed gratitude for this type of training which brings first responders together in one room – sometimes for the first time – to learn about how each other responds to a mental health crisis. These first responders learn how to better work together to not only help one another, but to provide the best possible response to a person in crisis. Highlights and lowlights are discussed – situations where something worked well or could have been better. Changes in mental health statutes and forms are covered. New ideas for better collaboration emerge from these trainings. Previous unknown mental health resources are discovered. Everyone comes away learning something new about mental health crisis response.

What is readily apparent at these regional trainings is the variety of resources available in different parts of the state. Not every part of Vermont has a robust mobile mental health crisis response. What IS consistent is the request from first responders for more options – more places to take people in crisis. Peer run respite centers will help fill a gap in services and hopefully can be an alternative to the emergency department. Certified peers who can provide crisis support and stabilization is a welcome addition to current services.

Vermont only requires 8 hours of mandatory mental health training for certified law enforcement officers. We need to continually educate our officers; a mandatory 4 hour refresher course, every two years, will keep law enforcement aware of changes in the law, changes in the resources available to them and emerging new trends in crisis response.

A workgroup to look at crisis response in Vermont must not be unwieldy and have the people who are actually doing the work in the field around the table. Because of the varied resources available in different parts of the state, it will be difficult to “standardize” crisis response.