

# Crisis cops defuse run-ins with mentally ill people

Minneapolis police say training helps them settle conflicts with less force



SCOTT TAKUSHI, PIONEER PRESS

**Minneapolis police officer Steve Bantle**, shown logging a call in his squad car, is a member of the department's new Crisis-Intervention Team. Bantle and other team members were trained in techniques of dealing with mentally ill people with a minimum of force. The officers say the program is working.

BY AMY MAYRON  
Pioneer Press

It was just a fluke that Minneapolis dispatchers sent Crisis-Intervention Team officers Steve Bantle and Troy Lennander to check out the 911 hang-up call on Pleasant Avenue. The officers turned out to be the right men for the job.

Judging from the loud music, banging and screaming coming from inside a first-floor apartment of 3118 Pleasant Ave., the officers thought it could be a domestic assault. What they discovered was a mentally ill man who was agitated and had been throwing himself against his living-room walls after getting hyped up about a "WWF SmackDown!" television show.

Fresh from the Minneapolis Police

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## Crisis cops

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Department's new crisis-intervention training program on a August evening, Bantle and Lennander drew on the skills they had learned about how to defuse someone like Aaron Patrick Hite. He would not stop pacing, defiantly refused to

answer questions and had access to several knives in his apartment. In less than 20 minutes and with the promise of stopping along the way for rolling papers and a Mountain Dew, Hite calmly allowed officers to handcuff him and take him to the Hennepin County Crisis Center for treatment.

"That had the potential to get real ugly, real fast," Lennander said. "Before we were trained, we may have rushed into the situation and then the fight would be on. Now, we stand back and learn to negotiate better."

Minneapolis police have shot and killed three people with histories of mental illness in the past three years, leading to an outcry by the public for police to respond better to calls for people in crisis. Partly in response to public concern, training Sgt. Ron Bellendier and police psychologist Gary Fischer last winter attended a weeklong seminar in Memphis, Tenn., where the police department was the first to establish a crisis-intervention team.

### A NEW SENSITIVITY

The 40-hour training emphasizes sensitivity toward people with mental illnesses and encourages officers to treat people in crisis as if they were officers' own family or friends having emotional trouble. The most effective part of the training, officers say, was hearing people who struggle with mental illness talk about what it's like when they lose control and find themselves

in a confrontation with police.

In 1982, Minneapolis resident Bruce Ario had a schizophrenic episode while he was a law student at the University of Minnesota. He stripped naked in a downtown Minneapolis skyway. Police called him "off his rocker" to his face and then arrested him for indecent exposure and threw him in a holding cell at the Hennepin County Jail, where he had his jaw broken by another inmate who couldn't understand why Ario was acting erratic.

"People need to look beyond the illness and see a person of value and worth," Ario said. "The police weren't good at that."

Officers today, even without the special training, would likely have taken Ario to the Hennepin County Crisis Center rather than arresting him.

Minneapolis police have trained 42 officers since April for the new crisis-intervention team and hope to train a total of 120. Officers are taught to recognize certain symptoms of mental illness and speak gently to people.

The crisis officers and a few supervisors are also the only ones in the department trained to use Tasers, weapons that shoot electrically charged darts that render people unable to move for several seconds.

### SPEAKING SOFTLY

Crisis officer Robert Mooney thinks of himself as forceful and curt with people he encounters on the job. He has learned to rethink that strategy after he recently used his Taser twice in a week responding to calls of two different suicidal men with knives.

One call was at a downtown parking ramp, where a man was crouching in a corner with a knife to his throat. Mooney's partner, Michael Morales, was the one who engaged the man, speaking softly and repeatedly expressing his concern for the man. The man talked to Morales but refused to put the knife down. Eventually, Mooney fired

the Taser at him, and it knocked the man away from the knife so officers could restrain him and take him to the Crisis Center.

Mooney was so impressed with how his partner handled the man that he tried the same technique a few nights later. He got the suicidal man in South Minneapolis to drop his knife, but the man struggled while officers were restraining him, and Mooney just pressed the Taser against the man's back so they could have a few seconds to handcuff him.

### GOING TO CRISIS

Since June 5, officers have brought more than 300 people to the Hennepin County Crisis Center, but police have nothing to compare that to. Officers previously never filled out reports when they took someone to the Crisis Center. Now they do, and police data operators are creating a computer program to track those arrests as well as other Crisis-Intervention Team information.

The Pleasant Avenue 911 hang-up call was an example of how crisis-intervention officers should handle themselves. Though it was hard for officers Bantle and Lennander to tame the frenzied man, they eventually gained his trust by listening, even repeating what he was saying to let him know they weren't dismissing him. They also told him that he wasn't doing anything wrong or illegal and that they were only going to handcuff him and take him to the Crisis Center for his own well-being.

Along the way, Hite seemed concerned about crisis workers going through his pockets and asked Bantle to be the one to go through them first. Bantle did, and then said to Hite, "We did what we could for you."

"You did good," Hite replied. "You did your job."

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