

NYPD to Step Up Mental Health Crisis Training. But Is It Enough?

In the two years since Mayor Bill de Blasio said the city would better train the NYPD to handle confrontations with New Yorkers suffering from mental illnesses, police have killed at least seven people when responding to calls of 'emotional distress.' One was Deborah Danner, a 66-year-old with schizophrenia. A police officer shot and killed her while she was wielding a bat in her home in the Bronx last year.

On the one-year anniversary of Danner's death Wednesday, mental health advocates debated where the city should put its resources in order to avoid such incidents moving forward. One advocate, D.J. Jaffe, wrote in [an op-ed](#) in the Daily News that the money used to train NYPD officers to respond to mental health episodes—about \$17 million in the program's first two years—would be better spent enhancing services for people with "serious" mental illnesses. After all, he said, "police step in only after the mental health system fails."

But mental health advocates and family members of victims who held a press conference at the foot of City Hall on Wednesday said the NYPD's crisis intervention team (CIT) training works, if implemented properly. In fact, they said, it should be expanded to cover more officers, and only trained officers should respond to the more than 400 calls of emotional distress the NYPD handles each day.

"Any time they have a hostage situation, they send specially trained officers and will not let any other officer intervene, because they understand this situation is unique," said Lorenzo Diggs, a peer specialist who is trained to help those like himself who have had experience with a mental illness and the criminal justice system. "This is the same thing."

The NYPD Inspector General's Office echoed advocates' concerns in [a report on the CIT program](#) in January. Although CIT training meets national standards, it is

"random whether officers assigned by dispatch to mental crisis incidents are CIT-trained," the report said. In addition to training more officers, the IG recommended the department make sure CIT-trained officers are deployed to respond to mental health crises. It also said the department should develop a mechanism for collecting data and analyzing the outcomes of the program.

The city has trained at least 7,000 police officers in crisis intervention and plans to train 23,000 officers by next year.

Advocates are asking de Blasio to reconvene his task force on behavioral health and criminal justice to find ways to involve social workers, mental health clinicians and other nonpolice professionals as first responders to mental health crises.

"Countless people have been saved by officers with training in CIT, but CIT training alone is not going to prevent all these deaths that keep on happening," said Carla Rabinowitz, advocacy coordinator at Community Access. "We want to create a fully responsive CIT system in New York that's more than just police."

The city has created five "co-response" teams that include both police officers and mental health clinicians from the city's Health Department. A department spokeswoman said the teams have been deployed nearly 2,000 times to "engage people with mental illness and/or substance use who are identified as having escalating behaviors and increasing risk to themselves or the community." The teams are never sent as first responders to a 911 call, however, the spokeswoman said.

She added that recommendations of the mayor's now-defunct task force are being implemented. After delays in the plan, the city says that by next year it will have two diversion centers where police officers can take people with mental illnesses to be connected to services, rather than taking them to jail or an emergency room. —C.L.