

“You are missed”

Mental health advocates hold vigil for victims



Each balloon told a story.

Advocates, including some clutching black balloons, joined together at City Hall recently to honor the memory of New Yorkers in mental health crises who have died since 2015 in encounters with police.

The February 23 vigil paid tribute to nine people, including Deborah Danner, a 66-year-old Bronx resident diagnosed with schizophrenia, who was shot by NYPD Sgt. Hugh Barry in 2016.

A black balloon was used to memorialize each of the nine victims. Carla Rabinowitz, Advocacy Coordinator of nonprofit group Community Access, which works with New Yorkers experiencing mental health concerns, read each name aloud and told their story, after which the balloon was popped.

“You are missed,” Rabinowitz said as each balloon burst.

She noted that all nine deaths have occurred since the NYPD implemented Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training in June 2015.

“That’s a crisis,” she remarked.

The activists called on the city to reinstate the Mayor’s Task Force on Behavioral Health and Criminal Justice, which was convened in 2014 to implement new response techniques to crisis calls, and also to bolster NYPD training for dealing with emotionally disturbed persons, or EDPs.

Steve Coe, Chief Executive Officer of Community Access, explained that task force members were experts from a variety of fields, as well as city agencies.

“Pull the group back together, get the experts in the same room. Figure out what’s going on, what’s working, what’s not working, so we can end the senseless violence that is happening to people in crisis,” Coe said.

“It’s not just the NYPD. They need to be supported in the work by all the other city agencies, and also the public in general,” he added. “There are many strategies to reduce this violence.”

Coe referenced other municipalities, such as Houston and Toronto, that currently send social workers in response to 911 calls involving EDPs.

“You don’t have to send the police every time there’s a 911 call,” he said.



Deborah Danner suffered from schizophrenia.

Rabinowitz told the story of Miguel Richards, a mentally ill man killed by NYPD officers in September 2017 in his Bronx apartment, after wielding a knife and a toy gun.

“Police came, they had 17 minutes to de-escalate. They could have used de-escalation techniques,” said Rabinowitz. “Instead, they started shouting. If you’re under mental distress, you don’t respond to that.”

Attorney Sanford Rubenstein, who represents several families of the deceased, said training for NYPD officers to deal with EDPs is “woefully inadequate.”

“At this point in time, less than 20 percent of police officers have been trained,” Rubenstein said.

On his weekly radio appearance, Mayor Bill de Blasio said 8,000 police officers have received CIT training so far.

“The goal is to get to over 20,000, and I think that is going to make a big difference,” de Blasio said.

After Community Access staged a City Hall rally last October asking the city to revive the Mayor’s Task Force on Behavioral Health and Criminal Justice, de Blasio spokesperson Olivia Lapeyrolerie noted that the task force was set up to meet for a finite period of 100 days, and came up with specific recommendations that are either operational or in the process of being implemented.

“This administration has made an unprecedented \$850 million commitment to make sure New Yorkers struggling with mental illness or substance abuse disorder have access to the care they need,” said Lapeyrolerie, who added that the Health Department and NYPD have established a working group to improve the city’s interactions with EDPs.

Rabinowitz acknowledged that the city currently has four co-response teams involving Health Department clinicians to respond to situations involving people experiencing a mental health crisis.

“But they don’t do 911 calls, and they don’t do calls of violence. They do calls where a person is showing aggression but [is] not violent. So, that doesn’t help us,” said Rabinowitz, who noted that the city gets more than 200,000 calls to 911 per year that involve EDPs.

On February 15, NYPD Sgt. Hugh Barry was acquitted of all charges related to Danner’s death, although an internal discipline process is now underway.

The acquittal elicited a strong response from both de Blasio and Police Commissioner James O’Neill, who said protecting lives is one of the core values for NYPD officers.

“It’s not an easy job, but we, as a department and as individuals, must be accountable for our actions,” he stated.

“Deborah Danner should not have died, she should still be with us,” de Blasio said. “And we have to do a lot going forward to make sure that nothing like this ever happens again.”



NYPD Sgt. Hugh Barry was acquitted of all charges.

For more information, please visit www.communityaccess.org or call 212.780.1400.