

'Not Guilty' Danner Verdict Fuels Calls For Reform

The police officer who fatally shot Deborah Danner, a woman with schizophrenia who picked up a bat in a moment of emotional distress in her Bronx apartment in 2016, was found not guilty of all charges against him Thursday morning.

Mental health advocates have used the high-profile case to push for reforms that could reduce the number of fatal encounters between the police and people with mental illnesses. They doubled down on their demands following the verdict.

"The tragedies keep piling up," said Carla Rabinowitz, advocacy coordinator for Community Access, a nonprofit that has tallied nine incidents in which a police officer killed someone while responding to a 911 call for "emotional distress" since June 2015. "People in the mental health community are afraid."

Rabinowitz said the city needs to figure out a way to bring in social workers and mental health professionals as first responders and to consistently deploy officers who have received crisis-intervention training when mental health-related 911 calls come in.

Police Commissioner James O'Neill said at an event Wednesday that he is open to changing the system, noting that the NYPD is looking for ways to reduce the volume of mental health calls that police have to respond to.

Meanwhile, D.J. Jaffe, executive director of Mental Illness Policy Org., has used the example of Danner's death to argue that the focus should be on changing the system to better support people with serious mental illnesses, rather than seeking criminal justice reforms. "Blame rests on mental health dept. not NYPD," he tweeted Thursday. —C.L.