

Society not equipped to deal with mentally ill

MARIANNE KELSEY ORESTIS
Special to the Chronicle

Mental health dysfunction is rampant throughout the country. With more than one in five persons affected with mood disorders or the consequences of such the nation is in a crisis. We are not prepared.

Untreated, mood disorders can become the nightmare you never dreamed of. It can destroy relationships, jobs, health and your pocketbook. In severe cases a person can become so disoriented he/she does not even realize he/she is ill and intervention may be required.

If a person becomes agitated to the point of injuring himself or others, the antiquated Baker Act will be utilized.

The Baker Act is the same as an arrest, except the person being arrested is not criminal but ill. And this person can be handcuffed and is placed in the back of a police cruiser and transported to the nearest Baker Act bed, of which there are none in Citrus County.

Persons have been transported for up to 18 hours before finding a crisis psychiatric hospital bed in a neighboring county. Oftentimes, this person does not have access to food or water or toilet. And, this person is ill. The need for crisis beds in Citrus County is immediate and the solution is far.

We need funding for crisis beds, socialization services and transportation for this 20 percent of Citrus County's population and funds are slashed on a regular basis, services are cut and people go without treatment, medication or love. Our children are put in jails rather than in hospitals. The situation grows worse, and the number of persons without treatment increases.

You read about them in the paper.

What you don't hear is how they tried to get help and it was not there for them because of money or transportation or stigma. The hospitals have even been closed due to lack of funding, mostly due to the IMD Exclusion, a federal government payment discrimination.

The mission of the Depressive and Manic Depressive Support Group of Citrus County is to help persons and/or their families (if the family is still present) learn about and then successfully live with the oftentimes devastating symptoms of depression or manic depression (bipolar disorder).

We who live or have lived with the problem of mood disorders understand as perhaps few others can. In sharing our experience, strength and hope with others we help to

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Baker Act needs immediate reform

STEVE ARTHUR
sarthur@chronicleonline.com
Chronicle

Tom, a 32-year-old West Point graduate who was living in Homosassa near his father a month ago, was taken into custody by deputies after walking through his neighborhood with a weapon he had taken from his father's house. He was convinced to surrender by his father.

Tom suffers from bipolar disorder and had been experiencing a manic phase of the disease. He was taken to the Marion/Citrus Mental Health facility in Ocala for evaluation.

His father said he was happy when he learned that a Marion County judge ordered his son to the VA hospital in Gainesville to receive treatment for his illness.

The father said his son suffers from a disease that causes him to suffer a chaotic rollercoaster existence of extreme manic highs turning to deep bouts of depression that bring him teetering on the ledge of suicide.

Sheriff's reports substantiate what Tom's father had to say about his son. Tom had been in jail a few days before being taken in for mental evaluation. He was facing charges of aggravated assault. Shortly after making bail for that, he was facing another charge of shoplifting.

"I was glad that finally he was going to get some help," the man's father said. "I couldn't help him. Nobody could help him. But finally the system was there to help this veteran, my son. I was so thankful, but then they called me a day after he went in and said they were releasing him."

John Pickens, a VA public affairs officer in Gainesville, put me in touch with the doctor who released Tom. The doctor explained that as soon as a mental patient no longer shows signs of being a danger to himself or to others, he must be released.

"Those are the rules. I don't like them, but we have to follow them," the doctor said.

"The system has let us down once again," Tom's father said. "I don't know what is going to happen to my son now."

His father said Tom is now staying with his sister's family in Illinois.

Thousands of mentally ill Americans are not getting the psychiatric care they need. They are shunted from police squad cars to

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mental health clinics for brief periods, and then they are put back on the streets to begin the cycle all over.

People with disturbing brain diseases often try to self-medicate themselves with illegal street drugs and get in all manner of trouble when not being victimized. Because our nation and state have closed many government mental institutions, many of these ill people populate our prisons.

Florida state prisons, based on national statistics, are holding at least 10,400 individuals with mental illness. Florida's jails are incarcerating an estimated 5,000 other mentally ill people.

Florida's Baker Act gives police the ability to take a person into custody if the officer judges that person to be a danger to self or others. Its fault is that a person can only be kept in custody for a maximum of 72 hours and if the person no longer shows signs of being a danger to self or others, that person is set free.

According to Seminole County Sheriff Don Eslinger, who heads Partner's in Crisis, a coalition of state leaders in government and law enforcement, many of these arrests are repeats.

"Eight thousand Baker Act arrests have been made on approximately 5,000 people."

In more than 80 percent of these cases, according to the Florida Sheriffs' Association that is actively lobbying to have the Baker Act changed, there is a substantial likelihood of the person causing bodily harm.

Sometimes the officer involved makes the decision to exert force to deal with the mentally ill person. Sometimes

that force is what the law calls deadly physical force.

Sometimes the mentally ill person kills the officer.

Based on national estimates, individuals with untreated severe mental illness commit up to 5 percent of the homicides in Florida each year. People with mental illnesses are killed by police at a rate four times greater than the general public.

The tragedy in this is that with proper treatment, people with severe mental illnesses are no more dangerous than the rest of us.

According to the Treatment Advocacy Center based in Arlington, Va., nearly 750,000 adult Floridians have a severe mental illness.

Because Florida's Baker Act does not require prolonged treatment, these untreated illnesses result in all varieties of violence, incarceration, homelessness and, often, suicide.

The lifetime suicide rate among the general population is about 1 percent, as opposed to 10 to 13 percent for those with schizophrenia and 15 to 17 percent for those with manic-depressive illness. Studies suggest suicide is more likely with inadequate or no treatment for the illness.

Florida's inadequate treatment laws, based on "dangerousness," are also often linked to the criminalization of those with mental illness. They get incarceration instead of treatment.

The Florida Sheriffs' Association has been pushing the Legislature to amend the Baker Act in two ways, Eslinger said.

"First, we want to broaden the criteria for arrests to allow a mental health professional the ability to get help to a person before the person's condi-

tion deteriorates. The way it is now, law enforcement makes first contact. We would like to shift that burden to mental health professionals.

"Second is what is called assisted outpatient treatment, to make it mandatory that people with severe and persistent mental illness get the treatment they need, ordered by a judge, rather than releasing them to the streets.

"We believe that these changes would save money in the short term and in the long term. This year the legislation we were supporting didn't make it out of certain committees. We're going to try again next year."

Citrus County Sheriff Jeff Dugay said money might have been the reason for the legislative miscarriage.

"I think it died because it called for too much money at a time when money was scarce," he said.

Eslinger said legislators and committee staffers didn't have the right numbers.

"It was a strategic goof," he said.

Florida is one of the very few states (42-8) remaining that don't allow for assisted outpatient treatment for the mentally ill.

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