

MHSA PEI

Key Informant Interview

Interviewed: Manny Solano, Deputy Police Chief, Watsonville Police Dept.

Interviewer: Jerry Solomon, PhD

The interview: The interviewer met at Mr. Solano's office on September 23, 2008 for a one-hour interview. The interview was recorded and is summarized below.

Introduction

Mr. Solano was given a brief explanation of the MHSA PEI process. His importance as a stakeholder to the process was discussed. He was eager to discuss his twenty years of experience with the relationship between law enforcement and mental illness and drug abuse. He noted how frustrating it is for he and his officers because they get involved only after a person is accused of breaking a law. He supports the funding of mental health programs that offer people treatment before they offend.

Relationship with the Behavioral Health Unit

Mr. Solano stated that when responding to a call the police must assess the situation rapidly to determine if there has been a crime committed, in which case an arrest is made; or if someone is exhibiting signs of mental illness, in which case they are brought to the Behavioral Health Unit for assessment. He reports that there have been good interactions with the BHU during the past few years. The two organizations have worked to coordinate their services and to accommodate to each other's needs.

Need for officer training

Mr. Solano welcomed the idea of additional training of police officers about mental illness and effective strategies to de-escalate difficult situations that sometimes arise. Currently the Police Department doesn't offer trainings to assist officers to make helpful social service recommendations. He remarked that Alan Lamb, LCSW, at Watsonville Mental Health, helped train his officers in the past and he was very pleased with the results. He believes his

volunteers and officers would like to know about available resources they could offer people they encounter that are in distress.

Mr. Solano volunteered that he has thirty recently hired officers needing training and orientation in how to assist the mentally ill. He was very open to a collaborative training model with the mental health community for his officers.

Outcomes for over 60

Mr. Solano supported the recommended outcomes for this age group. His officers often respond to complaints regarding the elderly who regularly go off their medications. They work closely with Adult Protective Services who assist in making appropriate referrals. “We work as a team.”

Gatekeepers he believed to be important include: utility and public works, Retirement Village management staff, para- and metro transit; rescue missions, Salvation Army; food pantries, Meals On Wheels, The Resita and Plaza Hotel.

First Break Program

Mr. Solano supported the establishment of a first break program in Santa Cruz county.

It can often be a dangerous situation if police are called into a first break situation. The officer is responsible to assess whether a person needs to be held involuntarily at the BHU for their own or for the public’s safety. Often there are weapons present.

Mr. Solano spoke with compassion about the situation, “We know the people pretty well because we’re a small town, so we try to do the best we can for the individual and their family.” The BHU responds well when his officers arrive and the two agencies have well-established protocols. He has not received any complaints from his officers regarding the current system.

Transition Aged Youth

The group between 18 and 25 years of age is less of an issue for Watsonville compared with the City of Santa Cruz police according to Mr. Solano. Watsonville has fewer homeless in this age group. The homeless in Watsonville tend to be over forty years old. Prostitution is not a common issue in this age group. Occasionally, “some kids find an abandoned home and crash there, but this is not a major problem for the police.”

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Mr. Solano has dealt with the consequences of drug abuse for most of his career. He has been especially interested in youth drug prevention. He stated that increasing methamphetamine use among youth living in Watsonville is an increasing police concern.

He believes that residential treatment is the most effective intervention for youth and that current services are inadequate to address the needs of Watsonville's youth. "We need more low cost and affordable counseling of all sorts." The best drug treatment results Mr. Solano has seen have been with those attending faith-based programs. The police are often frustrated when outpatient services are offered to people who are on the streets still engaging in problem behaviors.

Mr. Solano agrees that supporting stressed families and youth will assist anti-gang efforts. He felt that it was especially important to involve the churches in Watsonville. He suggested that counseling and follow up services be made available at churches in the area.

One of the Police Department's pressing concerns is how to project drug use and other social forces influencing youth today into the future so that programs can be created to deal with upcoming law enforcement concerns.

Mr. Solano stated that his officers would probably benefit from LGBT focused trainings, but believes that most of the new officers are more sensitive to these issue than in years passed. He was pleased that the first gay pride parade in Watsonville this past summer went well, with no problems reported by the police or the community.

Closing Quotes

"I think the available mental health services are good, but I need to know more about what is currently being offered in our county."

"Currently there are no officer complaints regarding the mental health system."

"We need assistance in creating projections of how social factors will be influencing law enforcement concerns in the upcoming years."

"Some police forces have added mental health staff to respond to issues more rapidly. We'd welcome having someone like that working with us."