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Idaho's mentally ill getting help from courts, police *High-profile violent crimes have spurred officials to look for ways to stop violence before it gets out of control.*

Ernesto Bustamante. John Delling. Michael James Lee. George Nickel. Dorian Willes. Matthew Jones. Reports of murder and violence by people who suffer from mental problems, or those shot by police during episodes fueled by alcohol, drugs or mental illness, often capture sensational headlines.

That's no surprise. The numbers of "mental holds" — when police place someone in mandatory custody for mental health issues — increased by nearly 600 since 2009, from 3,746 to 4,338 in 2011.

About one-fifth of Idaho's prison inmates have a diagnosable mental illness. And with the economy ailing, more Idahoans are feeling the strain of an empty pocketbook, fewer people have work-related health insurance, and fewer community resources are available from the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare.

But Idaho police and courts are working on ways to help before situations turn violent. Police agencies have implemented a program called Critical Incident Training, which teaches officers to recognize the signs of mental illness, post-traumatic stress and drug or alcohol problems. Officers also get training in how to de-escalate a tense or even life-or-death situation — using special techniques to calm down people who are upset or unstable.

Sgt. David Cavanaugh has overseen the Boise Police Department's CIT program since 2007. Boise launched the program after the 2004 shooting of 16-year-old Matthew Jones, who charged at a police officer with a bayoneted rifle. "We wanted to look at how we were dealing with people in crisis before that point," Cavanaugh said.

Boise's police ombudsman had long recommended officers get the training. Boise's partners include the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, Autism Society of the Treasure Valley, Veterans Network and the National Guard. Most Boise officers have had a minimum of four hours of CIT overview training; a cadre of CIT-certified officers have had as much as 40 hours.

Like Boise, all Meridian officers have at least basic training in defusing potentially violent situations with mentally ill people, said Tracy Basterrechea, deputy chief of the Meridian Police Department.

Meridian's officers take a six- to eight-hour CIT, with an annual four-hour refresher; some officers have taken a 40-hour course. Officers know that with cuts to state mental health programs, they will have to handle more calls. In Meridian, police officers put 88 people on mental holds in 2010; as of late November, Meridian police had taken 98 residents to area hospitals for mental holds in 2011.

"We don't get to turn away or say we don't have the funding," Basterrechea said. "We have to deal with it. People expect you to have those answers." Officers decided to incorporate veterans' issues like traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder after a 2009 incident with decorated veteran George Nickel.

Nickel was shooting up his apartment complex in a PTSD- and alcohol-fueled episode. Officers shot at Nickel but didn't hit him; ultimately, he surrendered and no one was injured.

Fourth District Judge Deborah Bail handled Nickel's case through a modified version of her drug court, which tries to get people holistic help and treatment to interrupt the cycle of crime, court, prison and the social welfare system caused by their addictions.

Since then, Nickel has worked with police, courts and veterans to help others in situations like his.

"Several of the officers in the George Nickel shooting didn't really want to testify against him," Cavanaugh said. "After they learned his story, they thought he didn't need incarceration. (With) that kind of attitude, we might be able to have an impact."

That emphasis revealed its value late last year, Cavanaugh said, when officers encountered a drunken veteran Downtown. He couldn't comply with officers' commands because he was having flashbacks.

"One of the officers had been a Marine and was able to help him through," Cavanaugh said. "He was able to get (an) appointment (the) next day with VA."

In early November, Ada County opened the first veterans court; more are planned in Canyon County and Pocatello, state officials say. The courts will help veterans struggling with addiction, mental illness and veteran-specific problems like traumatic brain injury and PTSD.

Idaho has 10 mental health courts to serve people with serious and persistent mental illness in trouble with the law, said Norma Jaeger, statewide drug coordinator.

The help is important because as of November, the Idaho Department of Correction had 1,642 inmates with diagnosable mental illness in a prison population of 7,738 (as of Dec. 31). That includes a broad range of conditions, including schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. About 500 have mental health issues serious enough that they require special housing or ongoing clinical support to function at least marginally in the general population, said spokesman Jeff Ray.

While the need is great, the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare's Adult Mental Health program has lost more than \$3.8 million — or 17 percent — for personnel and programs between fiscal 2009 and 2012, said spokesman Tom Shanahan.

Health and Welfare reduced its Adult Mental Health staff by 35 jobs — including 28 clinical positions that provided direct care to participants, Shanahan said.

"We were serving approximately 4,500 people on a regular basis and decided that people who had mental health services available through private insurance or Medicaid would be evaluated for transition to care providers in the private sector," Shanahan said.

Some 450 people were transferred to private providers. Still, the actual number of people Health and Welfare serves is going up.

"We attribute much of this increase to the continued economic stresses and social issues," Shanahan said. "We are receiving more crisis calls, many for people we had no previous contact with, either in our Adult Mental Health or Medicaid programs."