

Guest Column By Chief Dennis R. Naylor- Mental Illness in society today

We can usually tell when someone is sick by certain telltale signs including sneezing, coughing, runny nose, and things of that nature. These symptoms demonstrate to the world that the person is physically ill. We've all had the common cold at one time so we can sympathize with what he or she is experiencing. When someone has a psychological disorder however and is mentally ill, the symptoms are not always so clear and we may not have any clue as to what the person might be experiencing.

A couple of months ago, the topic of mental illness was the focus of a Daily Star news article and we at the Oneonta Police Department commented about how pervasive the problem has become. We talked about the fact that our involvement with individuals suffering from mental illness has skyrocketed over the last few years and that members of this Department are engaging in advanced training to better address these situations. As it stands now, one in four American adults live with mental illness and in 2013, the Oneonta Police Department addressed mental health issues with people ranging in age from 13-88 years old.

The statistics speak for themselves and a way to reduce mental illness while also properly treating those who suffer from it must be found. Since a means to accomplish this task has not yet been achieved, we in law enforcement are obligated to fill in the gaps. The New York State Mental Hygiene Law states that if a person is deemed to be a danger to themselves or others, law enforcement has a duty to take that person into custody and transport him or her to a crisis hospital for a psychological evaluation. This standard for evaluation does not cover all aspects of mental illness and there are many individuals who need help, but who don't get it because they do not fit into the above criteria. These people unfortunately slip through the cracks and struggle to function in society. Frequently these individuals end up in the criminal justice system for unlawful actions which are rooted in mental illness.

Sometimes the illnesses can be controlled with medicines and the individual who was suffering can function normally. However, if he or she stops taking the required medication, their underlying issues often manifest and we as police might be called to intervene. If the involved person is deemed to pose a danger, we will take him or her into custody for evaluation. Unfortunately, this process all too often becomes a revolving door in which the individual is taken into custody, transported, evaluated, cleared, and subsequently released, but not cured. As a result we the police find that we're called to repeatedly intervene for the same person at future incidents.

Whether the mental illness is caused from chemical imbalances, traumatic events, mental deterioration, injury, or a myriad of other causes, those who suffer from mental illness do not

wish to suffer any more than someone with a cold wants to be sick. Consequently, those with mental illness may have reasoning skills which are not always consistent with the rest of society's and their reality and thought processes may differ. Because of this, it is oftentimes the families of those who are mentally ill who are most affected in terms of coping with the disease.

Although a solution to this societal concern is not readily available, there are some things that we as a community can do to help. First is to understand that everyone is battling with their own problems in one regard or another and sometimes those problems are exacerbated mental illness. Be patient and understand that everyone does not have the same ability to process information and rationalize as one may expect them to. If someone seems to be mentally unstable, do not argue with the person or engage them in confrontation, simply try to deescalate the situation. Don't stare or look down upon someone who is disheveled or unkempt; regardless of a person's mental situation, everyone needs to be treated with dignity. Lastly, if someone is acting in a bizarre manner, call the police. Unfortunately sometimes those with mental illness can be violent or unpredictable and the best course of action is to ask law enforcement to investigate. A fine line is sometimes all that separates the mentally well, from the mentally ill so we must always value our health while we have it. To learn more about mental illness, please visit the National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI) website at www.nami.org.

"It is the mission of the Oneonta Police Department to provide professional services with integrity and dedication, to preserve life, to enforce the law, and to work in partnership with the community to enhance the quality of life in the City of Oneonta."

