MENTAL ILLNESS: Calling 911

Note: This article, by Laura Usher – NAMI Crisis Intervention Training Program Manager, first appeared in the NAMI Advocate, Fall 2015.

The thought of needing to call police for help can make an upsetting situation sound even more frightening, but it is sometimes necessary if a situation escalates into a crisis. In the event that you need to call the authorities, there are a few things you can do to keep the situation as calm as possible. It is comforting to know that both the Lake Charles City Police and the Calcasieu Parish Sheriff’s Department have officers who have been trained to handle a mental health crisis. You should ask for a CIT officer whenever possible.

**What to Do When You Call**

Share all the information you can with your 911 operator. Tell the dispatcher that your loved one is having a mental health crisis and explain her mental health history and/or diagnosis. If the police who arrive aren’t aware that a mental health crisis is occurring, they cannot handle the situation appropriately. For instance, the officer may be thinking jail rather than psychiatric hospital.

Be aware that your loved one may be placed in handcuffs and transported in the back of a police car. This can be extremely upsetting to a witness, so be prepared.

**What Are Police Allowed to Do?**

There are some things that police can help you with in most places.

**Transporting a person who wants to go to the hospital**. A well-trained CIT officer can often talk to a person who is upset, calm him down and convince him to go to the hospital voluntarily.

**Taking a person to a hospital for an involuntary evaluation.** In certain circumstances, police can force a person in crisis to go to the hospital involuntarily for a mental health evaluation. (In our area, a family member will need to go to the coroner’s office and fill out a brief form called an Order of Protective Custody.)

**Checking on the welfare of your family member if you are worried about her or can’t reach her.** Call the non-emergency number for the police department in your community and explain why you are concerned. Ask them to conduct a welfare check.

**Your 911 Checklist**

Have this list on hand when you dial 911 so that you can follow these suggested guidelines. Give the dispatcher the following information:

* your name
* address that law enforcement should come to
* any weapons that are present
* the name of your loved one
* age
* height and weight
* clothing description
* diagnosis (if there has been one)
* drug use (current or past)
* medication (on or off)
* prior violent behavior
* past psychosis
* details about past delusions or hallucinations
* triggers
* things that have helped in the past

Remember: You are asking unknown professionals to come to your home to help you resolve a crisis. They will have no information about the situation unless you inform them.

With the help of a professional, even with a crisis, there is HOPE.

NOTICE: Register for the NAMI Family-to-Family class to begin August 23 by calling Jessica at 433-0219.