

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/for-mental-health-month-a-new-initiative-focused-on-serving-safely>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

In their role as first responders, police officers interact frequently with people with mental illnesses and/or intellectual and developmental disabilities.

It is conservatively estimated that up to [10 percent of calls to police involve persons with a serious mental illness](#) and that [50 to 80 percent of police encounters involve persons with a disability](#). The frequency of such encounters has led many law enforcement agencies across the country to train their police officers to deal safely and effectively with people in crisis. Even so, the results of interactions are too often tragic: in 2017, for example, mental illness played a role in nearly [25 percent of fatal police shootings](#).

In recognition of the significant work done in the field over the last several decades as well as the critical need to build additional capacity in law enforcement agencies across the country, this month the Vera Institute of Justice launched [Serving Safely: A National Initiative to Enhance Police Responses to People with Mental Illnesses and Developmental Disabilities](#). As co-directors of Veras Substance Use and Mental Health Program and Policing Program, respectively, we see this initiative as a critical opportunity for law enforcement agencies to partner with community mental health and other social service providers, as well as with individuals with lived experience and their family members, in developing collaborative responses to people with mental illnesses and/or developmental disabilities.

Our objectives are clear. We aim to:

Critically and emblematic of the types of partnerships we hope to increase in the field, Serving Safely is an initiative whose work will be driven forward through strong collaboration. Supported through a cooperative agreement with the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Vera is also partnering with leading organizations and experts in the fields of policing, mental health, intellectual and developmental disability, crisis intervention, peer advocacy, emergency medicine, prosecution, and technology development.

As organizations across the country draw attention to Mental Health Awareness Month this May and to the various ways that mental illness impacts people's lives, the launch of Serving Safely offers a chance to reflect on the myriad opportunities for improving the way criminal justice stakeholders interact with vulnerable community members at all stages of the justice system. Certainly, it is incumbent upon individual communities to develop a comprehensive crisis care continuum that offers accessible and acceptable services designed to help people stabilize and promote individual recovery. But it is also vital that police agencies are engaged as partners in this work given how routinely they interact with people in crisis and the dangers that these interactions pose for officers.

Serving Safely will deploy a variety of strategies to build these multidisciplinary partnerships; for example, by providing direct [training and technical assistance](#) to policing agencies, by supporting the development of a broadened network of champions in the field, and by developing a curriculum for executives that supports managing comprehensive and meaningful community strategies. By providing these and other resources to police agencies across the country, Serving Safely will equip more police officers with the tools they need to serve safely and, in so doing so, promote a justice system that better serves everyone.

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