

# **The Impact of Mental Health Cases on Local Law Enforcement Agencies**

*A three year study by the Abingdon Police Department  
of local ECO & TDO data collected 2012-2014*

The handling of mental health calls has become a major issue for law enforcement agencies in Virginia. All agencies are mandated by state code to provide transportation in cases where an emergency custody order (§ 37.2-808 Code of Virginia) or temporary detention order (§ 37.2-809 code of Virginia) is issued. The state mandated transportation is a major issue for many smaller agencies, especially agencies in Southwest Virginia. Unlike most agencies, the Abingdon Police Department has devoted the last three years to gathering data concerning the amount, frequency, and cost of mitigating mental health cases. However, the greatest concerns continue to be time and distance. While officers are busy providing an unfunded, state mandated service; their communities are without the services of the officer(s), often for hours at a time. For many agencies in the Commonwealth, this is of no real concern because the agencies are large enough that the loss of an officer for a few hours has no real impact upon patrol operations. In other cases, agencies are large enough to have dedicated transportation units to handle these calls; leaving the patrol shift at full strength. In Southwest Virginia, this is not the case. The mitigation of mental health cases are largely left to officers on patrol.

Often, when discussing this issue with mental health providers or elected officials, there is confusion concerning the involvement of local law enforcement agencies. In simple terms, mental health issues affect local agencies in three ways:

1. Service of emergency custody orders
2. Service of temporary detention orders
3. Service of emergency custody orders that transition to temporary detention orders requiring execution by the same law enforcement agency.

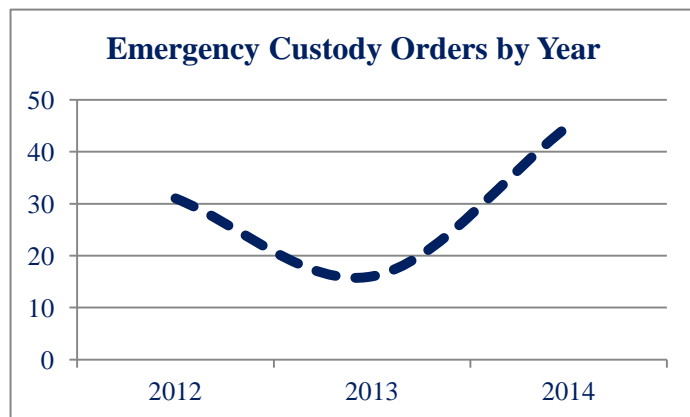
The following report is designed to show the number of mental health calls handled each year, the time spent on these calls, and the expenses related to mental health calls. It is important to keep in mind that service of mental health processes are mandated by the state and local agencies do not receive additional funding or support to provide those services.

## 1. Emergency Custody Orders

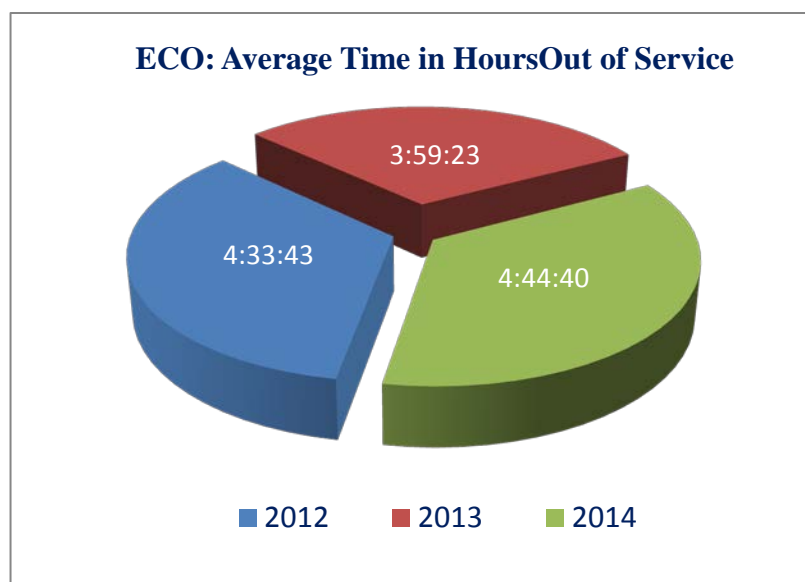
When an officer executes an emergency custody order (ECO), it is necessary that they remain with the patient during the entire call. Mental health facilities do not have a secure area to evaluate patients and the hospitals are reluctant to devote resources to a secure holding room. This takes the officer away from their regular duties to the community for hours. In Virginia, a person can remain in custody under an ECO for up to eight hours. At the conclusion of the eight hour period the person must be released or transported to a facility for further evaluation.

If there is one word that describes the greatest concern for local departments when serving an ECO it is TIME.

- Time is required for the mental health worker to arrive to screen the patient.
- Time is needed for the local hospital to medically screen the patient, just in case they are admitted to a facility for treatment.
- Time is often necessary for the mental health worker to find a suitable location to accept the patient for further treatment.



Through all of these processes, the officer sits...and waits...and sits...and waits...and



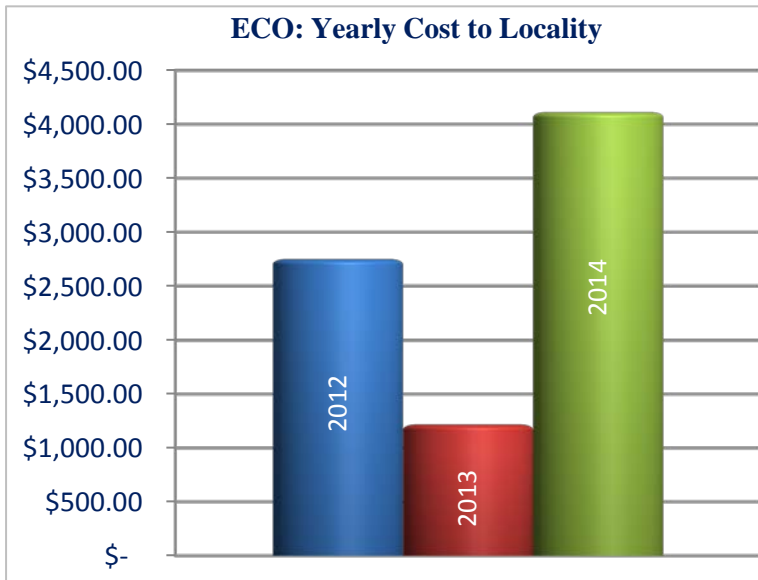
WASTES the most valuable resource the officer offers to the community he serves, his time. This process takes TIME!

Between 2012 and 2014, Abingdon Police Officers responded to 52 ECO calls. The following graphs depict expense factors related to the police service of emergency custody orders:

Officers of the

Abingdon Police Department executed 31 ECOs in 2012; 16 in 2013; and 45 in 2014.

During the three year data period, officers spent an average of 4 hours, 25 minutes (4:25:55) on each ECO that was executed. As depicted in the graph, the amount of time required was greater in 2014 than in previous years. Keep in mind that many agencies work eight hour shifts. This means that over half of a shift is spent sitting with an ECO case.



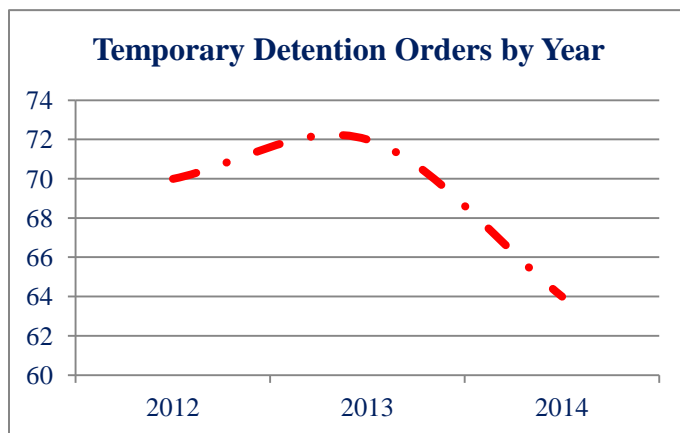
Officers with the Abingdon Police Department work twelve hour shifts, so they spent over 1/3 of a shift on an ECO service when this service is rendered.

Between 2012 and 2014, the Abingdon Police Department spent an average of \$2,639.76 a year on ECO cases. As depicted in the graph, 2014 was the most expensive year to date. Expenses related to ECO services are not budgeted and are paid for through normal budgeted line items.

## 2. Temporary Detention Orders

When an officer executes a temporary detention order (§37.2-809 Code of Virginia) or TDO, he is required to transport the patient to a facility for further mental evaluation, usually this occurs after the patient is taken in to custody on an ECO. Some of these facilities are located many hours away from Abingdon, which results in greater time and expense for the officer and the department. If there is one word to sum up the frustration local departments experience with executing a TDO it is DISTANCE.

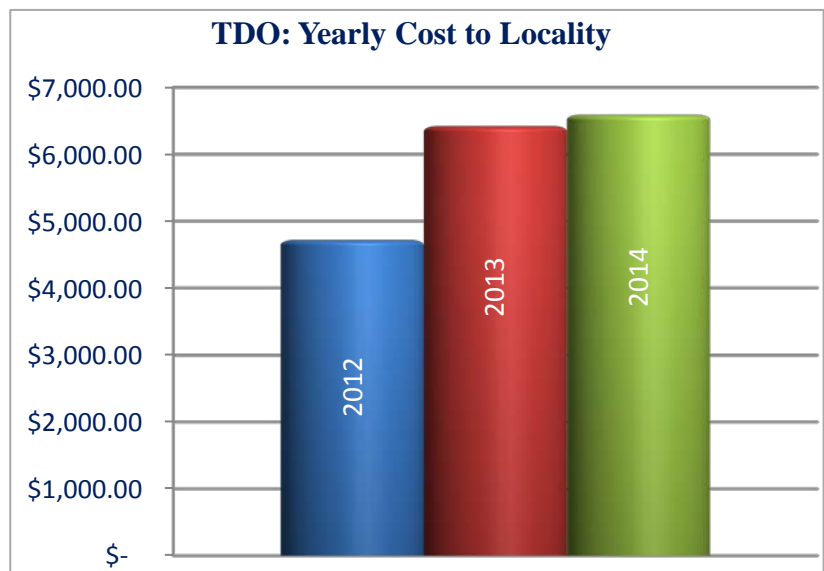
Because of population and geography, agencies in southwest Virginia are at an extreme disadvantage when executing TDOs. A look at the distance table speaks volumes about the miles our agency, and others in our region, drive each year simply to execute a TDO. Many agencies require additional officers to conduct a transport if it exceeds a certain distance or time. For example, the Abingdon Police Department requires two officers to make transports that exceed two hours in driving time, one way. This is to provide an additional support for the officer should an emergency occur in transit. Naturally, this adds additional costs to the transport.



Between 2012 and 2014, Abingdon Police Officers responded to 206 TDO service calls. The following graphs depict expense factors related to the police service of emergency custody orders:

Officers with the Abingdon Police Department executed 70 TDOs in 2012; 72 in 2013; and 64 in 2014.

As Einstein figured out long ago, time and distance are closely correlated. With TDO service, increased travel distances require greater amounts of officer time. During the three year data period, officers logged 15,534.9 miles in transporting TDO cases, an average of 5,178.3 miles every year. In addition, officers spent an average of 2 hours, 48 minutes (2:48:17) on each TDO that was

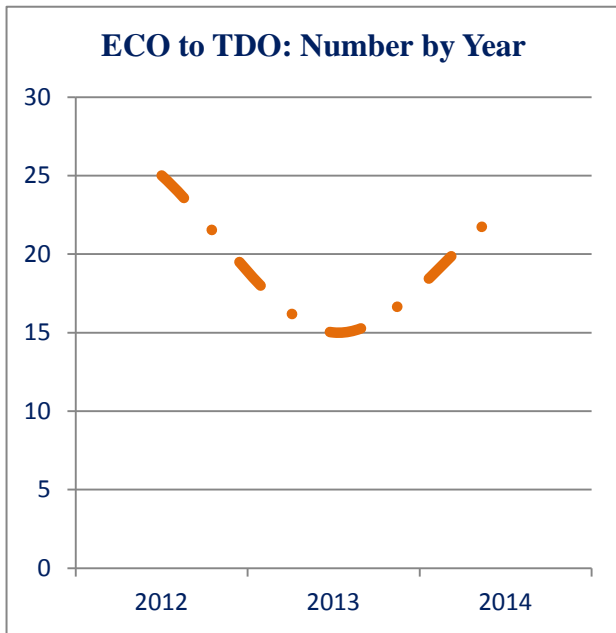


served. For agencies utilizing eight hours shifts, 25% of the shift is devoted to serving the TDO. Officers with the Abingdon Police Department, working twelve hour shifts, spend nearly 1/6 of a shift in transit when serving a TDO.

The increase in travel distances and time, results in a predictable increase in costs associated with executing TDOs.

For the past three years, the Abingdon Police Department has spent an average of \$5,911.59 per year, on TDO transports. This cost includes, officer pay, fuel, and vehicle expenses. Again, the agency does not budget for TDO transports, so the cost must come from existing budget lines.

### 3. Emergency Custody Orders Transitioning to Temporary Detention Orders

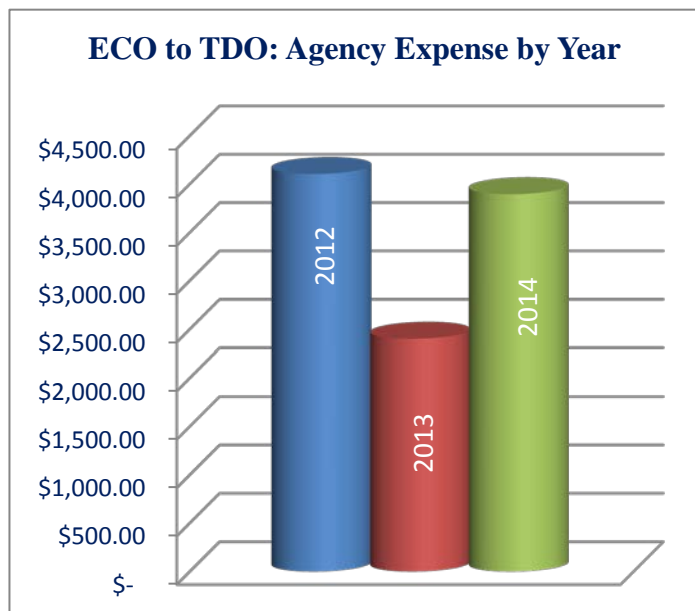


Often, officers are required to serve an ECO, which transitions to a TDO once the patient is evaluated by a mental health screener and cleared by medical staff at the local hospital. If you remember the time components required to complete each process, the officer will most likely be out of service for at least five hours waiting on screening and placement during the ECO process. Then, the officer must make a transport to a mental health facility under the TDO, which requires an average of 2 hours, forty-eight minutes. By the time the officer returns, nearly eight hours of his shift has been used.

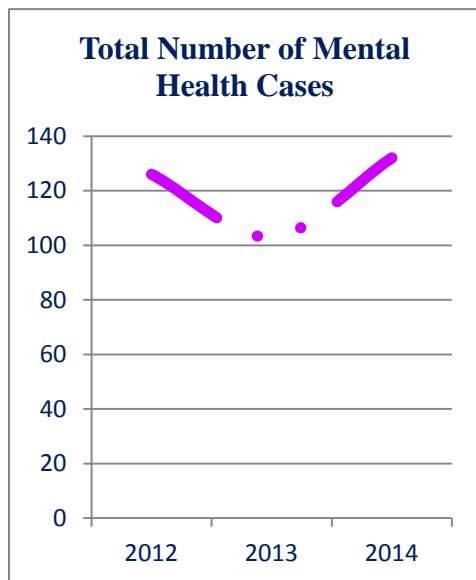
These calls, because of the greater amount of time involved, are the most expensive for local police agencies. During the covered study period, the Abingdon Police executed 63 ECOs that transitioned to TDO cases. On average, each of the 63 cases, required 7 hours, 33 minutes of an officers time to execute. For many agencies, this consumes the entire shift for the officer. In the simplest terms, each of these cases robs local communities of law enforcement resources for nearly eight hours per event.

As you may have predicted, this is the most expensive category of mental health calls. The time spent waiting for the ECO to transition to a TDO greatly increases the expenses for this category of service. Once the travel time, associated with executing the TDO, is added to the equation, the cost increase is definitely noticeable.

Over the three year study period, each of these events cost the locality an average of \$165.10 per event.

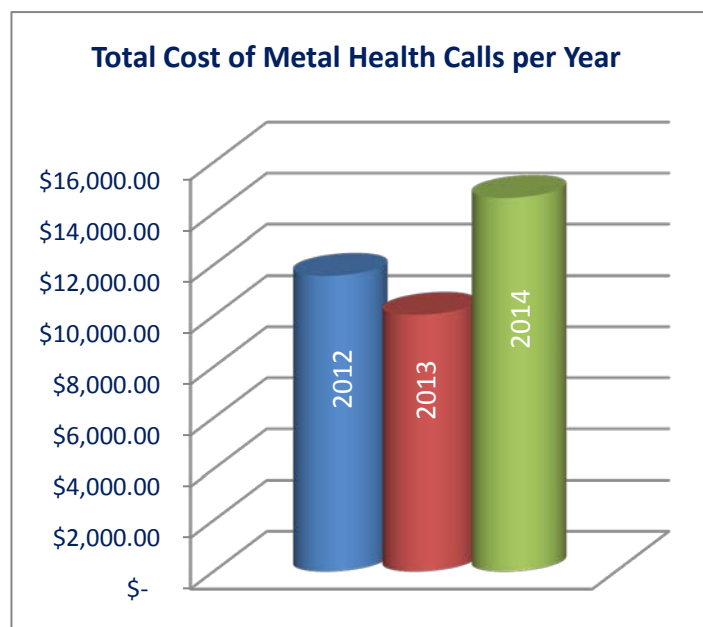


## Conclusion



When combined the number of ECO, TDO, and ECO to TDO cases during the three year observation period exceeds 300. These cases resulted in an actual cost to the agency of \$36, 217.47 during this period. This amounts to an average of a little more than \$100.00 per event. For me, the most frightening statistic is 1,248:38 hours; the total amount of time that officers of the Abingdon Police Department spent with mental patients over the past three years. In other terms, officers devoted over 31 work weeks to sitting with and driving mental health patients.

It should be apparent that mental health cases place hardships on local police agencies. This is primarily related to the expense and the amount of resources that each case consumes. The great unknown is the impact these cases have on communities due to the absence of officers who are sitting in hospitals waiting with a patient, or transporting a patient to a treatment facility. Quite simply, the public should be outraged! Local tax payers EXPECT the officers that they support to serve the community. They want to see the officers in neighborhoods, walking streets, and spending time visiting schools. In other words, they expect to SEE the SAFETY side of PUBLIC SAFETY.



The current state of the mental health process is greatly inhibiting the effectiveness of local law enforcement agencies in their communities. Agencies are devoting valuable resources to serve less than one percent of the total population. The legislature needs seek a better



solution and REMOVE law enforcement from the mental health equation. The current process turns perfectly good law enforcement professionals in to armed mental health security officers. This system is broken, and it is costing the tax payers. In smaller departments, this affects the number of officers on patrol and available to respond to calls. Removing an officer, or officers, from patrol duties without additional funding, affects the bottom line of the department and the safety of the community. There needs to be further discussion of other ways to handle these calls, additional funding and an alternative to law enforcement agencies handling transports of mental health patients.

From a local perspective, it seems that, hospitals and many mental health providers are billing insurance companies, Medi-Care, or the state for their services. The cost for law enforcement is being shifted to the local tax payers.