

A crisis we must deal with - Citrus County Chronicle (Crystal River, FL) - February 24, 2018

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The violence in Florida over the past 10 days has been excruciating. The murder of 17 young people at the high school in Parkland is a national tragedy that demands a legislative and moral response.

My daughter-in-law is an alumnus of the high school, so it hit close to home.

The tragedies we experienced in our own community over the same weekend were just as horrifying. The death of **Ryan Batchelder** was unavoidable in the final moments, but there were months of opportunities for mental health and VA folks to respond to the warning signals.

The murder of Erin Prost in Homosassa was yet another sign of how out of control things have gotten.

Ryan Batchelder was an Army veteran who was shot and killed by sheriff's deputies last Saturday after a confrontation in Hernando.

Batchelder, 28, was stationed in Afghanistan and was being treated for service-related PTSD.

As reported in the Chronicle this week, Ryan's mother made a desperate call to the sheriff's office on Saturday afternoon warning that he had overdosed on his meds and was not in a good state of mind. Ryan's wife worked at a local Hernando business and there was fear for her safety.

By the conclusion of the confrontation, Ryan lay dead in the parking lot of a Hernando shopping center and the lives of so many people had been changed forever.

The background tragedy is that the family knew Ryan needed help and had been trying to get counseling from the VA. Appointments were hard to get and pushed out many weeks.

Mental illness does not respond well to waiting periods.

This young man served his country and experienced combat. While he did not die on the battlefield, he died as a result of his service and a lack of urgency after he returned home.

Now the victims include his wife and child; his family; and the officers who were injected into a situation that ended in Ryan's death.

On the same day Erin Prost, 42, was shot and killed in her home in Homosassa. Her boyfriend, Bruce Leonard, is suspected of the crime but we will never know the details. He turned the gun on himself after he shot his girlfriend.

Erin was a waitress at the Crab Plant in Crystal River and was loved by her fellow workers and customers.

Less than 12 hours after these tragedies, the Chronicle published the start of a series of stories about the lack of mental health services in our community. The publication of the stories was a coincidence, but there was no greater reinforcement of the importance of this crisis than what happened to Ryan and Erin last week.

People die every week in our own county because we do a miserable job in providing mental health services. The VA is an awful bureaucracy dragged down by a lack of funding and urgency. The Centers, the official agency charged with mental health care in Citrus County, has a limited footprint and very few services.

Citrus County in general is served by a few over-worked private providers and a scattering of government services. The funding through the state and Medicaid is almost non-existent.

The Chronicle is going to spend a lot of time over the next 12 months digging into this issue and shedding light on the problem.

Most of us have ignored this so long that it has become an epidemic that too often spills into the headlines because of the violence and mayhem that ensues. Our approach to mental health problems is too often calling a sheriff's deputy to Backer Act an individual during the crisis. That serves almost no purpose because the individual is usually released within a few days with no treatment or remedy for the underlying problem.

In Ryan's case the problem can be tied back to his service to our country. So many others enter the world of despair thru the abuse of drugs and alcohol. Any many others have imbalances that only health care professionals can figure out.

When we ignore the drug and mental health problem, we end up with violence in the streets. People die way too young and the lives of people around them are shattered.

Many of the property and vehicle crimes we have in this community can be tied directly to those abusing drugs. Our jails are filled — at a huge cost to every taxpayer — with people who suffer from drug or mental health problems.

There has got to be a better way of dealing with these problems before they make the front page of the paper. I don't know what the answers are, but we are going to spend time searching for them and bringing them to your attention.

Together we can explore and embrace some solutions. We owe that to Ryan and Erin and all the other victims.

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