

# Bridging the Gap

## Mental Health and Threat Assessment Team Formation

With the exponential growth of Pasco County in recent years, the Pasco Sheriff's Office was searching for strategic ways to address the expanding population. In looking into calls for services throughout 2018, Sheriff Chris Nocco, aided by PSO's Intelligence Led Policing unit, discovered that bridging the gap between those in mental health crises and services available to those individuals, could reduce the amount of emergency services utilized by those calls.

With that, Pasco Sheriff's Office recently introduced the Mental Health and Threat Assessment Team. This unit, believed to be one of the first of its kind in the Tampa Bay area, will focus on citizens who have had recurrent calls for service relating to mental health. The team, consisting of a lieutenant, a sergeant, a clinical social worker, two case managers and six deputies, aims to close the divide between law enforcement and community service providers through partnerships.

During 2018, mental health related calls attributed for 11 percent of PSO's total calls, equating to over 19,000 calls. However, that 11 percent isn't an accurate number, says Sheriff Nocco. That percentage doesn't take in to account calls that aren't directly attributed to mental health, such as trespassing or domestic violence, but may have underlying mental health components at play. Nevertheless, PSO took approximately 3,400 citizens into custody for a mental health evaluation in 2018, and over 500 of those citizens had multiple Baker Acts throughout the year.

Pasco Sheriff's deputies responded to a call in 2017 regarding a suspect who'd shot and killed a man the suspect believed was talking to his girlfriend. The girlfriend did not, in fact, exist. Upon the deputies' arrival, the suspect engaged them in a gun fight with a high powered rifle. The suspect, who had a history of mental illness, ultimately took his own life. These are the exact types of cases this new unit



*Pasco Sheriff Chris Nocco discusses the new team, joined by leaders from multiple units.*

aims to prevent before they occur.

The goal is to divert citizens away from calling the county's emergency services and tie up valuable, life-saving services, when citizens may simply want to speak with someone who will listen. Sheriff Nocco used an example of a citizen in the Land O' Lakes area who called Pasco County Communications Center 124 times in

2018. The same citizen called MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa 88 times during the same period. Lt. Toni Roach, who will lead this new team, met with him on May 20 to see what services PSO may be able to provide. Since that contact, the county has received no additional calls for service from this citizen.

By building a rapport with citizens who utilize county emergency services with a high degree of frequency, PSO can glean patterns of behavior and other knowledge that will help deter them from committing crimes. For instance, if a subject is known to call emergency services on Thursday due to issues they may be experiencing because they've run out of their medications on Wednesday, this unit would reach out to them on Tuesday to ensure they are keeping up with essential wellness items. Additional resources this new team will look to assist with are housing and career services, behavioral health specialists and substance abuse help groups, among others.

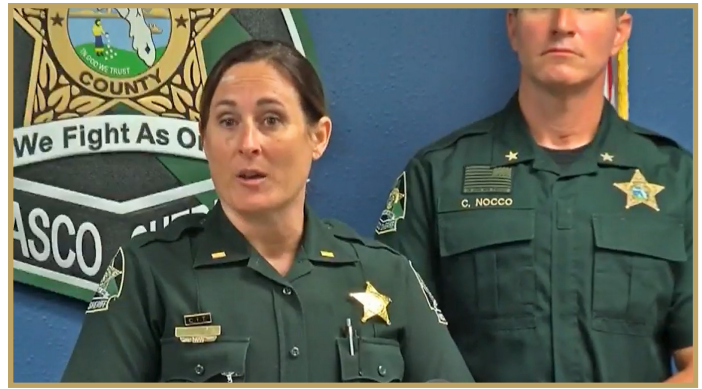
“We’re trying to mitigate crisis. Understanding that everybody has a baseline, and when people dip below that baseline, we can provide some intervention strategies, connect them with a case manager, or other behavioral health resources within the community that can help them stabilize before they get to a crisis,” said Lt. Roach.

Mental health is also being addressed with the inmate population at the Land O’ Lakes Detention Center. In August 2018, the first mental health housing unit was established, and a new mental health and substance abuse unit opened in July 2019. Between a quarter and a third of the jail’s population at any given time throughout the year needs assistance with mental health issues. These specialized units aid inmates by connecting them with services and offering counseling while they’re in custody. The program also works to keep them on the right track once they’re released by educating them on resources they can utilize on the outside, how they can obtain those resources and offering career services before they are released.

Sheriff Nocco explained that this was a step in the right direction for Pasco since medical resources for these types of issues are not abundant in the area. “This is definitely the wave of the future,” he said. “Mental health and substance abuse, they’re healthcare issues, but there’s not enough healthcare-related resources out there.” While deputies may spend hours on a call for service relating to mental health, this unit aims to alleviate these types of calls from high frequency users, which will allow for patrol deputies to respond to other calls in the community.

While PSO can’t predict what crime these citizens may commit, this unit allows PSO to be proactive in a way that patrol deputies cannot when it comes to mental health. PSO’s Mental Health and Threat Assessment Unit is expected to be in place and begin working with citizens in October 2019. The ultimate goal for this unit is to build relationships with those utilizing emergency services with a high degree of frequency for mental health related calls for service.

Article by Amanda Hunter



*Lt. Toni Roach discusses the Mental Health and Threat Assessment Team recently implemented by the Pasco Sheriff's Office.*



*Pasco Sheriff Chris Nocco discusses the new Mental Health and Threat Assessment Team*



*A deputy engages a suspect (upper left corner in a white shirt) with a history of mental health issues in a shootout after the suspect had shot another person whom he believed to be talking to the suspect's girlfriend. The girlfriend did not exist. These types of interactions are ones the new Mental Health and Threat Assessment Team will look to reduce.*