

# Serving Safely: The National Initiative to Enhance Policing for Persons with Mental Illnesses and Developmental Disabilities

February 2019  
Fact Sheet

People living with mental illnesses and developmental disabilities are disproportionately represented in contacts with the police, and these interactions can lead to stressful and dangerous conditions for everyone involved. Law enforcement agencies can now request the tools they need to *serve safely and effectively*.

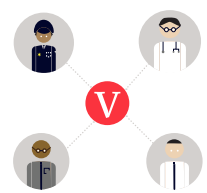
## Background



**Law enforcement agencies need our help.** Conservative estimates show that at least 10 percent of calls to police involve people who have serious mental illnesses, and that a third to a half of all use-of-force incidents involve an

individual with some type of disability.<sup>1</sup> In fact, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, people experiencing a mental health crisis are more likely to encounter police than get medical help.

Every day, police are tasked with responding to incidents involving people with mental illnesses and developmental disabilities. Lapses in communication can make these situations particularly unpredictable for officers and community members alike. Additionally, an estimated two million adults with serious mental illnesses are admitted to jails each year, making up a significant part of the nation's high levels of incarceration. Repeatedly, vulnerable community members are incarcerated with limited access to services and away from community-based support and treatment.



**A multidisciplinary response to a complex challenge.** Serving Safely brings together diverse stakeholders to work collectively on pressing issues facing law enforcement agencies nationwide. In partnership with the

Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) is bolstering existing resources and extending

the capacity of the field by building on BJA's significant investments in improving police responses to people with mental illnesses and developmental disabilities. Drawing on more than 55 years of experience collaborating with policing partners, Vera has assembled a multidisciplinary project team composed of leaders in the fields of policing, mental illness, intellectual and developmental disability, crisis intervention, peer advocacy, prosecution, emergency medicine, and technology development. Together, the team is working to

- › provide training and technical assistance directly to law enforcement, prosecutors, and partnering agencies;
- › develop and facilitate collaborative responses for people with mental illnesses and developmental disabilities who come into contact with the police, prosecutors, and their community partners—in ways that improve safety for all;
- › build a national community of practice for police responses to people with mental illnesses and developmental disabilities; and
- › contribute to and expand on available information on best practices, policies, research, and resources in the field and ensure that all resources are easily accessible and widely disseminated.



## Request assistance

**Improving policing for everyone.**

Serving Safely is helping to bridge the gap between police, prosecutors, and community members who may require a trained response with a behavioral health approach. By equipping law enforcement agencies with more of the tools and expertise they need to navigate interactions with people who have mental illness and/or developmental disabilities, the national initiative is working toward

- › ensuring that police officers can safely respond to people with mental illnesses and developmental disabilities;
- › engaging prosecutors to minimize unnecessary detention and incarceration for people with mental illnesses and developmental disabilities; and
- › strengthening relationships between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve.

To advance these goals, the national initiative is providing a wide range of services, including

- › trainings with police officers, prosecutors, emergency dispatchers, law enforcement leaders, legal professionals, victim service professionals, peers, and family members;
- › assistance with the development, review, evaluation, and implementation of policies and protocols that aim to improve police responses to people with mental illnesses and developmental disabilities; and

- › support after crisis incidents, and tailored solutions to promote long-term safety improvements in police departments and the communities they serve.



**What you can do.** Serving Safely is currently accepting requests for training and technical assistance.

If you represent a police agency, sheriff's department, or prosecutor's office interested in improving its practices and policies around responses to people with mental illnesses

and developmental disabilities, you can submit a request to be part of the Serving Safely initiative at [servingsafely.org](http://servingsafely.org). If you are a concerned community member, you can share this website with law enforcement agencies in your area.

Services will be provided through a growing consortium of subject-matter experts and partner organizations. Our organizational partners to date include:



### Subject Matter Experts

DR. MICHAEL COMPTON      MEREDITH HITCHCOCK, M.I.M.S.  
 KATHERINE NAMMACHER      MELISSA REULAND, M.A.  
 RON WILHELMY, RETIRED ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER NYPD  
 JUSTIN VOLPE      LAURA USHER

To learn more about Serving Safely, visit [www.servingsafely.org](http://www.servingsafely.org) or email [ServingSafely@vera.org](mailto:ServingSafely@vera.org).

### Endnotes

1 Martha Williams Dean, Henry J. Steadman, Randy Borum, et al., "Emerging Partnerships Between Mental Health and Law Enforcement," *Psychiatric Services* 50, no. 1 (1999), 99-101; and David M. Perry and Lawrence Carter-Long, *The Ruderman White*

*Paper on Media Coverage of Law Enforcement Use of Force and Disability* (Newton, MA: Ruderman Family Foundation, March 2016), [http://rudermanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/MediaStudy-PoliceDisability\\_final-final.pdf](http://rudermanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/MediaStudy-PoliceDisability_final-final.pdf)

### For more information

The Vera Institute of Justice is a justice reform change agent. Vera produces ideas, analysis, and research that inspire change in the systems people rely upon for safety and justice, and works in close partnership with government and civic leaders to implement it. Vera is currently pursuing core priorities of ending the misuse of jails, transforming conditions of confinement, and ensuring that justice systems more effectively serve

America's increasingly diverse communities. For more information, visit [www.vera.org](http://www.vera.org).

*This project was supported by Grant No. 2017-NF-BX-K001 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance.*

*The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics,*

*the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.*