

Remarks to Senate Finance Public Safety Subcommittee (January 17, 2014)
Dana Schrad, Executive Director, Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police

Increasingly, our local police officers are dealing with youth who need mental health services that may not be available in the community. For example, one of our departments recently dealt with a 9 year old who has been expelled because he has been so violent and disruptive. He gets put into detention and then released a few days later, only to be rearrested (twice for weapons violations.) The police department is hoping to soon be able to get him before a judge for a CHINS hearing. There seems to be no way to address the obvious emotional issues that he is having.

The Department of Criminal Justice Services mandates training for all officers in the Basic Police Academy on assessing and assisting persons displaying signs of abnormal behavior. These mandated objectives are 4.12.1 – 4.12.3 Mental Health, given in written and practical exercises covering subcategories Alzheimer practical, suicide barricade practical, and general mental health procedures to include Emergency Custody Orders and Temporary Detention Orders. There are no other mandates for training, although the School Resource Officers may receive some additional training from the Mental Health Department and Schools on school procedures when dealing with a student exhibiting mental health issues.

If a patrol officer is called to a mental health call for service involving a juvenile, an assessment is done by the officer or CIT trained officer. Through the assessment the officer/s may contact mental health for further evaluation. If the juvenile is in school at the time of occurrence, the teacher or faculty member will contact administration and the crisis intervention team at the school. Depending on the situation, school personnel may contact the school resource officer or patrol officer to assist. In most of the middle and high schools, the School Resource Officer is a member of the crisis intervention team. If the student is violent and may harm himself or others, the SRO will make sure the student does not harm himself or others, and assists to ensure that he student receives proper evaluation via the school counselor and/or the school psychologist.

For example, Chesterfield County Schools follow a specific Risk/Threat Assessment Interview packet when evaluating a student. Based on this assessment the student will be referred to other services as appropriate, such as Chesterfield Mental Health, Chesterfield Youth Planning and Development, or possibly school assistance programs. If the student is simply emotionally upset, an SRO may be approached for assistance. The SRO may give advice, refer the student to the school counselor or psychologist, or may assist the student with information from the "Teen Help Information" card officers carry with them.

Depending on the situation the student may be charged with criminal violations. Common violations utilized by SRO's include 18.2-60 Threats of death or bodily injury to a person or member of his family; threats to commit serious bodily harm to persons on school property, and 18.2-415 disorderly conduct in public places.

However, Chesterfield County is not representative of most of the state, where there are limited community resources for police, schools and the courts to access for troubled youth in need of mental health services. The Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police recommends that resources be allocated to support youth restorative justice programs and pre-trial diversion services to provide mental health and prevention services to help keep troubled youth out of the criminal justice system.

