

New training gives officers mental health service skills



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Kern's first responders are handling more cases involving the mentally ill, but unlike many other counties, Kern's law enforcement has never had its own crisis intervention team, until now. Special training gives officers skills to supplement mental health services, which has been forced to downsize over the years.

Sheriff's deputies and Bakersfield police officers get less than 10 hours of training in their academies on how best to handle calls involving the mentally ill. This week, a group of safety officials are training here to gain skills many say, they need on a daily basis.

Officials say calls involving the mentally ill have gone up over the years.

"The economy has bumped those lower level issues like mild depression, anxiety. It's bumped it up a little bit cause now, things are unsure," said Mobile Evaluation Team supervisor Juanita Buck.

Buck heads up the county's Mobile Evaluation Team. The eight person team, equipped with six months of training on handling the mentally ill, can respond to only half the calls it receives.

"Where I work in the rural part of the county they're even less available to us," said Deputy Sheriff Marcus Moncur.

Plus, officers are typically first to arrive. That's why 21 officers, both Sheriff's deputies and police, are going through a 40 hour intensive training, to better understand conditions like depression and bipolar disorder.

"If I have a better understanding of the patients, clients that are eventually going to wind up in the programs, then I can better assist MET, or if they're not on, I know what I'm looking at," said Deputy Moncur.

David Kessler had the training two years ago in Los Angeles County, and says he uses it on a daily basis.

"There is no comparison. The academy is very limited; it's about 8-10 hours of introduction into mental health issues," said Senior Deputy Sheriff Kessler.

Oftentimes, those who are mentally ill are in and out of jail for minor crimes. The training will enable officers to get those people the help they need, instead of landing them in jail, which officials say could help with overcrowding.