



SAFETY FIRST: Out of Tragedy Comes a Program to Protect Outreach Workers

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On November 4, 2005, Marty Smith, a designated mental health professional, was murdered while responding to a residential call in Poulsbo, Wash. In Washington, these professionals conduct investigations and can order an initial 72-hour involuntary detention. Smith was attempting to admit a man for a mental evaluation when the person being evaluated became enraged and turned on him.

The state's close-knit mental health community responded with shock and sadness to the loss of one of their own, but with a willingness to share opinions and develop a constructive plan to help prevent similar tragedies from happening in the future. Here's how that transpired.

In September of 2006, the Washington Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery hosted two safety summits for a statewide group of stakeholders that included mental health professionals, mental health administrators, law enforcement, union representatives and a member of the state House of Representatives.

The intent was to share ideas on issues related to safety of outpatient community mental health workers. It was also an opportunity for those who knew Marty to continue the grieving process and try to gain something positive from the senseless tragedy.

From Ideas to Changes

Initially, there was a resounding call for more frequent standardized statewide training for mental health outreach workers. Participants also said it was important to make information accessible to outreach workers

before they see clients so that risks can be appropriately assessed. Additionally, they recommended optional outreach in pairs. In 2007, the Washington state legislature passed the Marty Smith Bill, requiring all community mental health agency workers in direct contact with consumers receive annual training in safety and violence prevention. The bill also mandated that the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services develop the training with stakeholder input. Other important provisions allowed for two-person outreaches and required use of communication devices during any community outreach.

Shortly after the bill passed, as the divisions program administrator, I contracted with the Washington Institute for Mental Health Research and Training to establish a steering committee to help develop the curriculum and produce training materials for the Marty Smith Safety Training program.

This was a mutually collaborative process incorporating the knowledge and experience of experts from law enforcement, mental health agency staff and administrators. As a result, training videos and ancillary training materials were developed.

From 2009 through 2012, the Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery and the Washington Institute for Mental Health Research and Training conducted six two-day Marty Smith Safety Trainings and two one-day refresher trainings throughout the state, using a "Train the Trainer" model. The idea was that following the initiation period, all training would be done by the

agencies themselves. The in-person trainings augmented the training videos and provide specific instruction in the areas of verbal de-escalation, personal safety and safe outreaches.

Making Us All Safer

While program users reported that the curriculum was well prepared and produced, it lacked a formal evaluation of its efficacy. So, in fall 2011, the Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery contracted with the Washington Institute for Mental Health Research and Training to conduct an extensive evaluation. Participants were asked to rate the safety training on topics that included training effectiveness, perceived ability to handle potentially violent situations, training value and materials.

Ninety percent of respondents described training as "effective to very effective" in increasing feelings of safety in work-related situations and increasing confidence when dealing with violence. Participants rated the program as a successful method for disseminating needed information.

In 2014, online versions of the training materials became available to community mental health agencies and workers. Along with the other provisions of the law, every year all mental health agency staff at a licensed agency must complete safety training.

We're proud of the steps we've all taken to become better—and safer—at our jobs, and we think Marty would be proud, too.