

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-229](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Law enforcement encounters with individuals with mental illness may require special training and skills and can sometimes involve volatile situations, risking tragic injuries or even death.

The 21st Century Cures Act includes a provision for GAO to review the practices that federal first responders, tactical units, and corrections officers (for the purposes of this study, “law enforcement officers and agents”) are trained to use in responding to incidents involving individuals with mental illness. This report addresses (1) challenges that federal law enforcement officers and agents face; (2) applicable training, policies, and guidance; and (3) existing leading practices, relevant tools, and efforts to leverage information.

GAO selected the five DHS and five DOJ law enforcement components (e.g., Secret Service, Federal Bureau of Investigation) that represent the largest concentration of law enforcement officers within the two departments. GAO reviewed the training, policies, and guidance in place, as well as efforts to enhance them, and discussed these matters with knowledgeable officials. In addition, GAO held discussion groups with a nongeneralizable sample of law enforcement officers and agents, selected through component contacts, to discuss their perspectives. GAO also reviewed studies on law enforcement responses to individuals with mental illness to help identify leading practices and tools and interviewed stakeholders, selected through a structured process, to obtain their perspectives.

View [GAO-18-229](#). For more information, contact Diana Maurer at (202) 512-8777 or MaurerD@gao.gov.

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FEDERAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

DHS and DOJ Are Working to Enhance Responses to Incidents Involving Individuals with Mental Illness

What GAO Found

Law enforcement officers and agents from the Departments of Homeland Security (DHS) and Justice (DOJ) cited a number of challenges in our discussion groups related to their response to incidents involving individuals with a mental illness.

Challenges Identified in Law Enforcement Officer and Agent Discussion Groups

Identifying whether an individual has a mental illness

Communicating with individuals with a mental illness

Operating with limited access to mental health resources

Frequently encountering the same individuals

Source: GAO summary of discussion group comments. | [GAO-18-229](#)

All of the federal law enforcement components in GAO’s review either offer, receive, or are developing some form of training to their law enforcement officers and agents that addresses responding to incidents involving individuals with a mental illness. Further, all components have relevant policies or guidance in place, and all are undertaking efforts to enhance their practices in accordance with departmental guidance. Since DHS and DOJ components have varying missions and operational needs and interact with the public in different capacities, the nature and scope of training, as well as the number and duration of courses offered in response to individuals with mental illness varies; however, they generally include elements focusing on de-escalation and communication. In addition, DHS and DOJ both have efforts underway to have components review their training and policies under departmental guidance and plan to begin implementing any changes by 2018.

Stakeholders cited leading practices and tools for effective law enforcement responses, and DHS and DOJ components have generally leveraged information from other knowledgeable parties. For example, the Crisis Intervention Team approach involves training selected law enforcement officers on mental health topics and dispatching those officers on mental-health related calls. While models like this are typically used by state and local law enforcement agencies, their benefits could be considered in other settings such as federal law enforcement. DHS and DOJ officials are also using collaborative mechanisms within their departments, such as conference calls and working groups with officials, that have helped them leverage information from knowledgeable parties. In addition, DOJ’s Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), which supports programs and initiatives in the areas of law enforcement, among other activities, has developed and makes publicly available resources such as its Police-Mental Health Collaboration Toolkit. BJA also is working to stand up a national training and technical assistance center to improve law enforcement responses to people with mental illness. While aimed at state, local, and tribal law enforcement, a BJA official also acknowledged that the center could serve as an additional resource for federal law enforcement agencies to consult as they review relevant trainings, policies, and guidance on this topic.