

Past Panel: Self-Advocacy in Interacting with Law Enforcement

***Reflections:** The third and final Evening with the Experts of this summer, which took place on Tuesday, August 14th, had the highest attendance yet. The topic was Self-Advocacy in Interacting with Law Enforcement, which brought three panelists: a law enforcement deputy, a peer mental health advocate who has experience interacting with law enforcement, and a family support specialist who has experience interacting with law enforcement because of her child's mental health condition, and who advises other families on doing the same. These perspectives complemented each other well and, taken together, built a nuanced story about interactions between those in mental health crisis and law enforcement.*

The most resounding piece of advice from the panelists for those on either side of this sort of interaction was just to slow down and open a channel of honest communication between parties. All panelists acknowledged that it can seem especially difficult to take a pause to evaluate in the midst of a crisis, but being conscious of and communicative about exactly what is going on—from all perspectives—was a high priority for all panelists. A good evaluation would account for (at the very least) the material situation, the state of mind of the person in crisis, whether there are any weapons or immediate danger involved, whether the person in crisis has been in a similar situation before (and if so, what happened), and what the person's triggers or comforts might be. Once the person in crisis or their family/support member has these things figured out, they are encouraged to communicate with complete honesty to law enforcement. If a family member or support person helps someone who is routinely in crisis, they might have a 911 phone call script for efficiency and accuracy. When calling the police, requesting a CIT (Crisis Intervention Team) trained officer is also a good idea. Panelists noted that interactions involving force often stem from a miscommunication, and all felt that open, honest communication can help avoid these miscommunications.

In that vein, panelists suggested that law enforcement make a conscious effort to shift out of their usual instant-problem-solving mode and into a mindset of humanizing communication. If they do not have a lot of information, they might start by simply asking, "What's your name? How are you doing? What's going on?" and gathering as much information as possible from there. Asking these questions can provide insight to the situation, and in addition, panelists have found that those in crisis often find eye

contact and acknowledgement significantly restorative. This can be counterintuitive for law enforcement—the deputy panelist explained that it is often law enforcement’s instinct to solve a problem as quickly as possible—but that’s usually not what works best with mental health crisis. Indeed, a panelist remembered how it felt to be yelled at and commanded by police when she was in crisis: instead of following their orders, she was triggered, and felt flooded with reminders of trauma she had experienced earlier in life. This led her to continue to act violently. She believes if the officers had approached her calmly, she would have calmed down as well. Panelists felt that interacting as a human with a will to help is perhaps the most significant thing a law enforcement officer can do. The deputy reiterated this position, saying that the last thing he wants to do when dealing with a mental health crisis is to take someone to jail.

Panelists cited existing stigma as a main reason why law enforcement mental health crisis interactions can go south. They stated that the assumption that those in crisis are “just crazy people” can make law enforcement hesitant to spend time dealing with them. Likewise, the assumption that law enforcement is hostile or even violent can discourage those in crisis from wanting to involve them in the situation. Panelists placed much of the blame for these perceptions on media of all forms (both entertainment and news) and said it needs to take a more responsible position in depictions of those in crisis, of law enforcement, and of interactions between the two. When asked what individuals or organizations can do to help break down stigma between the groups and to help interactions go smoothly, the panelists said they believed more events like this one, where law enforcement, peers, support people, and community members engage as equals in open conversation, would make a great positive difference to the future of these interactions.