

Preventing and Reducing Stigma:

Law Enforcement



Why Does it Matter?

Law enforcement personnel frequently interact with people with mental illness and substance use disorders (SUDs) because these populations are disproportionately represented in jails and overall, within the criminal justice system.

Law enforcement personnel have to exercise substantial judgment about mental illness and SUD since law enforcement frequently serves as a gatekeeper between the criminal justice system and mental health systems.

Law enforcement personnel would benefit from a greater understanding of various psychiatric conditions, mental health issues, SUDs, and their co-occurrence.

What Can We Do?

- Provide police with training and support, including mental health consultation, formal training in crisis intervention, how to recognize mental health symptoms, and controlled role-playing.
- Offer court-ordered treatment, 24-hour structured care, case management, and family involvement.
- Increase access to community based-treatment services that reduce police contact, jail time, and re-incarceration rates.
- Provide programs that facilitate social contact between people with and without behavioral health disorders.
- Develop and implement crisis intervention teams. Work through local community mental health agencies to train officers to de-escalate without force, properly restrain individuals, and make initial assessments on handling situations with individuals with mental health or SUDs.

What is the Impact?

- Overrepresentation of people with SUD or mental illness in the criminal justice system.
- People with mental illness and SUDs may fear that law enforcement will use an aggressive approach, including refusing to listen to them.
- Law enforcement may perceive people with mental illness and SUD as more dangerous and less credible than others.
- People with mental illness are perceived as untrustworthy and unable to provide accurate information about their situations; little is done to resolve injustices on their behalf.
- People with mental illness are vulnerable to victimization. If they seek help from the police, they may not be taken seriously or receive appropriate assistance.
- Unrecognized trauma and blaming.
- Intersectionality of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation further complicates stigma and police interactions.



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Resources

[Preventing and Reducing Stigma: Law Enforcement](#)



Online Learning: [Addressing Stigma and Substance Use Disorders: A HealthKnowledge Course](#)



Web page: [Great Lakes PTTC, Preventing and Reducing Stigma](#)



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