Flipping the Script on Law Enforcement Encounters

BY PAUL R. PACE

Deflection helps turn law enforcement encounters into opportunities

There are typically two options for law enforcement when interacting with the public. One is to arrest the person breaking a law. The second is to take no action after investigating the situation. A third option, called deflection, is being promoted to police and communities.

The effort has police working with a coordinated system where a third party provides a handoff, guiding the civilian experiencing mental health or substance misuse concerns to community-based service providers, thereby helping the person avoid entering the justice system.

"It's about flipping the script on first encounters—so it's supportive of people with services," he said. Social workers who volunteer their time with the deflection model can provide clinical interventions or case management services. Social worker Kurt August, program manager for the city of Philadelphia Police-Assisted Diversion Program, also recognizes the value of police deflection services.

"We meet people where they are and match their goals at the time of encounters with policy—all the way to getting them their health needs," he said. "There is no cutoff time and it is free of charge!"

To date, August said the program has made 600 referrals. About 40 percent led to drug or alcohol treatment or shelter placement in real time. And everyone who is referred or diverted is offered same-day support, he said.

"We've been able to show people are less likely to re-offend when they are given proactive supports in a meaningful way," August said.

Joc Charlier is the executive director of the Police, Treatment, and Community Collaborative (PTACC). NASW and PTACC are in the final stages of establishing a partnership that will expand the availability of information and training opportunities in the area of deflection to NASW members. Takia Richardson, a senior practice associate at NASW, will serve as the NASW liaison to PTACC.

Webinar Addresses Gender Assessments, Treatments

Another recent SPS on-demand webinar is "Understanding Evaluation Assessments for Gender Affirming Treatments." It is hosted by social worker C. Nicole Vanclant, who has been involved with the LGBTQ community for 16 years. She is a member of the NASW National LGBTB+ Committee and is also a transmasculine gender counselor.

The webinar examines gender dysphoria, and gives an overview of common gender affirming treatments, as well as components of an evaluation for those treatments. Participants will also gain knowledge of available resources for additional training and support.

Vanclant notes that 1.6 million adults in the U.S. identify as transgender. This group has high rates of suicide, and health and mental health disparities—and experiences stress, discrimination and stigma.

Transgender and gender non-binary individuals often need to get clearance for gender affirming treatments. There is a lack of access, however, because of the shortage of providers who are knowledgeable on the topic of gender diverse health care, Vanclant says.

"As social workers, as mental health providers, we're involved in all levels of care," she said. "We want to be part of taking down those barriers, not putting up those barriers."