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.

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.

Source: GAO summary of discussion group comments. | GAO-18-229