

# The South End

July 17, 2011

## Update: WSU professor investigates mental health emergencies

*Study seeks to understand, modify police interaction with  
mentally ill*

By [SUSAN WOODS](#) | The South End

Wayne State professor Dr. Bart Miles is serving as the primary investigator for the WSU School of Social Work Performance Improvement Project on a study reporting on the interaction between law enforcement officials and people with mental illnesses.

The goal of the study is to generate a greater understanding of the cause of mental health emergencies and to identify solutions that will “reduce the number of times police are required to intervene in mental health emergencies,” according to a School of Social Work news release.

Detroit, along with Portland, Ore.; Pittsburgh, Westchester, N.Y.; and Austin, Texas, were selected by the Judge David L. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law to participate in a nationwide project that addresses the involvement of law enforcement officers with people with mental illnesses.

Miles said police officers are called to respond to mental health crises. If the person experiencing the crises can provide contact information, then family or friends may be called.

“In other cities, there is a mobile mental health response team; however, Detroit does not have one at this time,” Miles said.

The Bazelon Center, based in Washington, D.C., enlisted the help of the Neighborhood Service Organization to lead the study for Detroit.

The NSO, established as a private non-profit human service agency in 1955, provides community development programs and services.

NSO later enlisted the help of the WSU School of Social Work, the WSU Police Department and the Henry Ford Health System to aid with research.

NSO Chief Operating Officer William Weld-Wallis said Midtown was chosen for three reasons.

First, rather than attempting to study the city as a whole, it's "a defined area for a study," Weld-Wallis said. Second, he said WSU has a "strong police presence in the area" and was, on a research-basis, already engaged in the study. Third, homeless providers have programs in the area, he said.

"Many homeless people suffer with mental illness, making this an area of increased interaction between mentally ill people and law enforcement," Weld-Wallis said.

NSO Research Coordinator Meghan Takashima said Michigan has "been quick to reduce funding" for mental health services.

The study, entitled "Identification and Evaluation of Police Engagement With the Mentally Ill in Midtown," began with the question of why police officers, rather than health professionals, are called to respond to mental health crises.

"When your house is on fire, you call the fire department. When you have a heart attack, you call an ambulance to take you to the hospital," Miles said. "When your house is being robbed, you call the police, but when you have a mental health crisis, there is nobody specifically in every city who (residents) call."

Miles said police officers are trained to deal with crime and not mental health problems.

"Police have little or no training in dealing with these incidences," Miles said. "Some have received training from the [police] academy, but three hours of training doesn't make you an expert."

The purpose of the study is to identify crisis factors, look at costs and benefits of when the police are called and how to advocate for professionals other than police officers to get involved.

“The study will report on the costs of interactions between police and the mentally ill and will make proposals on alternative strategies, which will result both in savings in public dollars and in a more treatment-oriented approach, rather than a punitive approach, to persons with mental illness,” Weld-Wallis said. “The police will be able to spend their time on the more appropriate activities of protecting the public good, while the mentally ill will get the treatment they need and deserve.”

The Performance Improvement Project conducts focus groups and interviews with police officers, homelessness housing providers, mental health providers and the Midtown Alliance, who are members of the community.

During a focus group, some of the police officers revealed they wished they had more training on dealing with mental health crises.

“Police have been injured and hurt when responding to mental health crises, and we think that training is essential for both the clients they are responding to and for the officers,” Takashima said.

The study found that roughly 30 percent of calls made to law enforcement officers from the Midtown area pertain to mental health crises.

“Any police department, including the (Detroit Police Department) and the Wayne State Police Department, will tell you that a disproportionate amount of time is spent by officers with people who are mentally ill,” Weld-Wallis said.

People exhibiting the signs of schizophrenia or experiencing a manic bipolar state are often those assessed by the police from calls.

“Police are able to assess whether there is an (immediate) mental health crisis or not,” Miles said. “If a person is in danger of harming themselves or others, they are taken to the crisis center at (Detroit) Receiving Hospital.”

An unexpected find in the study showed that police are called for people coming to or leaving adult foster care homes.

“For some who have mental illness, especially psychotic disorders, it can be really hard to stay in a shelter,” Takashima said. “It can be very overstimulating with a lot of people and tension. It can be difficult if they don’t feel safe.”

Homelessness is a major problem in the mental health community, and Takashima said many people who are mentally ill tend to be homeless.

“There is the challenge of trying to advocate for yourself; you may not be able to express your needs as well as someone without mental health issues. Maybe you have no source of income and are unable to work because of mental health,” Takashima said. “The system has failed them; housing is an essential component of health.”

The WSU School of Social Work began research in late January 2011, and the study is slated to run for three years.

Results found from the study may not be immediately considered.

Miles said he hopes that by “immediately advocating for services, ... eventually there will be someone to call during mental health crises.”

In the end, he said, it’s all about funding.

“If the state were to figure out it was in the best interest of the state to have others (respond as) opposed to having police officers respond,” Miles said, “then maybe they would fund it.”