

WHEN TWO PUBLIC HEALTH CRISES COLLIDE



By Karen E. Wheeler

As a paralegal in the SSI Unit at Community Legal Services, I have clients, like Walter Wallace Jr., with mental illness. In 2020, two public health crises collided: the COVID-19 pandemic and a mental health pandemic.

Good mental health is fundamental to overall health and well-being. COVID-19 has disrupted or halted critical mental health services while the demand is increasing. Those already prone to mental illness are at the greatest risk during the pandemic, and loss of social support can have an impact on people with mental illness. As members of the legal community, it is important that we recognize how these struggles can converge.

People who suffer from mental illness often suffer in silence. The number of mental health care providers in Pennsylvania is not sufficient to serve the population with mental health needs. According to SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration), close to 4.06% of adults in Pennsylvania live with serious mental health conditions, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depression. Philadelphia has the dubious distinction of being the poorest large city in the U.S. Here, only 46.7% of adults with mental illness receive services from the system or private providers. The remaining 53.3% receive no mental health treatment.

We are hearing from medical experts already that the current wave of COVID-19 is, once again, overwhelming both medical and mental health systems. The second wave is bringing more challenges like increased deaths from suicide and drug overdoses

and is having a disproportionate effect on the same groups who were impacted by the first wave of the virus: Black and Hispanic communities, older adults, lower socioeconomic groups, and health care workers. As Chuck Ingogla, president of the National Council for Behavioral Health told *The Washington Post*, “We are facing the loss of mental health centers and programs at a time when we are going to need them more than ever.”

Some of my legal aid clients during the pandemic are struggling to maintain their mental health treatment. Many of my clients lost access to treatment when their providers closed. I have been able to provide some clients with a list of names of mental health providers offering therapy sessions via teleservices, but not all facilities offer this much-needed service, leaving some to wait months to get an appointment with providers whose facility is short staffed. So how do we help those in need of help? Ultimately, calling the police may be the only option for families trying to care for their loved ones, but, as we saw with the fatal shooting of Walter Wallace Jr., that can have tragic consequences.

People on social media have commented about Walter Wallace Jr. having been in jail several times. It is not uncommon for people living with mental illness to encounter the criminal justice system and to be arrested. While state and federal prisons have resources to provide mental health care to inmates who were not receiving treatment before incarceration, the same cannot be said for local jails that are unable to meet the health care needs of people with mental illness. As mental health crises worsen, we see the holes in the services provided by our criminal legal system.

In most cases, when police encounter a person whose behavior is frantic and unpredictable, that behavior is not criminal—but an expression of mental illness—even if that person is holding a gun or knife. Walter Wallace Jr. was in the middle of an episode making it impossible for him to coherently follow police commands to “put the knife down.” The shooting of a person with a history of mental illness raises several questions. Why did it have to go straight to violence? Why not taser him? Neither police officer had a taser gun. Why not fire a warning shot or shoot him in the leg? Or wait for backup from PERT, the Psychiatric Emergency Response Team in Philadelphia?

Seeing the video of Walter Wallace Jr.’s shooting makes me frightened for my clients who are unable to access consistent mental health treatment during the pandemic. As the stress and psychological impact continues to wear on all of us, especially those who already have mental health challenges, I worry that the next police encounter in the middle of a mental health crisis could be one of my clients. How would it end? ■

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