

Recent suicidal incidents point to larger problems

By JESSICA POLLARD
STAFF WRITER

When officers responded to a domestic disturbance between two people at a home on West Standard Avenue in Hermiston last month, they were told the man inside could be armed with a gun. They knew from training if both of his hands were visible and empty, the risk of someone getting hurt would be much lower.

“But he wasn’t willing to show his second hand,” said Hermiston Police Chief Jason Edmiston.

The man — police never released his identity — eventually went on to inform officers he had a gun. He placed it in his own mouth and against his head. He asked the police to shoot him. The officers, who were standing 6 or 7 feet away with no cover, had their guns drawn while trying to de-escalate the situation.

This went on for 47 minutes, before the man agreed to be taken to Lifeways, Umatilla County’s mental health agency, for an evaluation. The department’s crisis negotiator had been called, but didn’t make it to the scene in time.

“Our officers were visibly shaken,” Edmiston said.

Edmiston said Lifeways released the man a few days later. Micaela Cathey, Umatilla executive director at Lifeways, said she couldn’t comment on specific cases.

Not having committed a crime, Edmiston said there was nothing stopping the man from retrieving his firearm from the police depart-



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Corporal Bill Golter of the Hermiston Police Department patrols the streets in Hermiston on Friday afternoon.

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ment, which is why the police filed an extreme risk protection order or “red flag” against him last week.

If evidence holds up in court, a circuit judge could issue an order preventing him from accessing guns.

The incident on West Standard Avenue is one of two that occurred in Umatilla County this past August. The next was just two days later, on Aug. 25, when 28-year-old Urbano Cazares of Milton-Freewater was resisting arrest for violating a restraining order at his family’s home.

Cazares pulled out a knife and held it against his own throat. It took several offi-

cers from different agencies, including the Umatilla County Sheriff’s Office, more than an hour to convince him to put down the knife. Cazares eventually agreed to a mental health evaluation at Lifeways. According to the Umatilla County Jail roster, he remains behind bars.

Cooling it down
On both occasions, local law enforcement were able to cool down the potentially suicidal situations with de-escalation techniques.

Most officers in Umatilla County, according to Pendleton Police Chief Stuart Roberts, have Crisis Intervention Team training.

The program in part

teaches officers how to speak with individuals who are a threat to themselves or others without talking down to them. Roberts said in more urban areas of Oregon, a separate unit in a law enforcement agency will have CIT training. But in Umatilla County, where mental health resources are thinner, most officers have the tool in their back pocket.

The way the Hermiston Police Department describes it, de-escalation moves in levels. It starts with verbal communication and could end with use of force.

“Sometimes use of force can be a form of de-escalation,” said administrative Capt. Travis Enyon.

Morrow County Sheriff Ken Matlack said it’s all about limiting demeaning “I’m in control” language of decades past when trying to reason with someone on

edge. “It’s all about trying to change the subject, make it user friendly, try to find an angle to comply to the point,” he said. “If you can get them to start asking questions, that’s a key sign because they’re engaging in dialogue.”

But de-escalation techniques are only a small part of the puzzle in a mental health crisis, and in some cases, they’re a moot point.

Last month, the *Los Angeles Times* reported some California law enforcement agencies were no longer responding to suicide calls, citing fears police involvement could agitate some situations into violence and increase the risk of lawsuits against police.

“Sometimes people that are in crisis want to harm themselves, but maybe they can’t so they force the situation,” Edmiston said. “It’s frustrating because we’re seeing more and more of these types of calls. We’re not clinicians.”

Next steps
Since Lifeways hired an engaging consultant early last year, following complaints from local law enforcement that almost resulted in a termination of

the agency’s contract with Umatilla County, police note new leadership has meant better collaboration.

“We’ve gotten to a point where we can get crisis workers in the field,” Roberts said.

For Cathey, the improved relationship comes from four different things.

“Changes specific to Umatilla County and our relationship with law enforcement lie in the staffing models for our crisis team, opening access in our outpatient clinics to more rapidly enroll individuals into service, opening lines of communication through regular meetings and focused problem solving,” she stated in an email.

She also stated Lifeways is in the final stages of opening Aspen Springs Psychiatric Hospital, which will provide 16 beds for people facing mental health crises.

In 2014, the Blue Mountain Recovery Center, which had the capability to take in people with substance abuse issues — something Lifeways does not — shut its doors.

Matlack noted in Morrow County there are few places for those experiencing mental health crises to go, and the Recovery Center’s closure exacerbated that.

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