



Bob Ellis/staff photographer

Cortland Police Officer Nathan Moran reaches to shake hands Friday with Eric Weaver, executive director of the Overcoming the Darkness program, at the Cortland County Regional Training Center in Cortlandville. Several area police officers attended the weeklong Emotionally Disturbed Persons Response Team training session. Looking on are, from second left, Cortland Police Lt. David Guererra, Chief Michael Catalano and Jackie Carlton Leaf, executive director of the Seven Valleys Health Coalition.

# 'A better understanding'

## Area police train to help the emotionally disturbed

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CORTLAND — Police Sgt. Chyenne Cute plans to take what he learned from the Emotionally Disturbed Persons Response Team training and implement it into not only his professional work but his life outside of the department as well.

Cute was among the city officers who attended its EDPRT training program and graduated Friday at the Cortland County Regional Training Center on Tompkins Street Extension in Cortlandville.

"We have an abundance of people within the community that have a mental illness, so learning how to treat them and how to help them is of great importance," Cute said.

EDPRT is a group that consist of officers who are specially trained to deal with emotionally disturbed individuals in a variety of situations. It helps people

who have emotional and mental illness who are in crisis.

"We actually resolve problems," said Lt. David Guererra, who is in charge of the city police department's uniform division. "We find a person with a crisis and find out if they need help. Then we are able to find the right services to help them."

This is Cortland's fifth graduating class with five of its officers attending. A total of 16 officers from several agencies graduated from this year's program.

"With the knowledge and training, I now have a better understanding with how to properly treat people and to be more empathetic," Cute said.

Cute said while he was not able to speak about specifics, he has been involved in incidents prior to the training, which he would handle differently now.

"There was a case, and the individual

involved was actually one of the presenters who spoke before the class," he said. "It really opened my eyes on how the case could've went differently."

Eric Weaver, executive director of Overcoming the Darkness, was the instructor for the course. Overcoming the Darkness is a program set up to reduce stigma, and increase understanding surrounding challenges of mental health-related issues.

"Most of the officers will probably begin using the information learned at 4:01 p.m. as they walk out the door," Weaver said. "They'll put it to use every day and it enhances their professional and personal lives."

"I think the biggest impact (from the training) was having people from the community come in and talk about their experiences," said city Patrolman Nathan Moran. "But to a lot of them, the experiences aren't struggles, it's how they overcame darkness."

## Police Train on Mental Health City PD Forming Response Teams to Handle People with Mental Illness

By MARK FERDINAND  
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Bob Ellis/staff photographer | Russell Hollier, left, of Family Counseling Services, presents a program to a group of law enforcement personnel from Central New York including the Cortland Police Department and the SUNY Cortland University Police Department. It was part of a week-long program training police officers in handling emotionally disturbed people.

About 30 percent of police calls in the city involve dealing with civilians who have some kind of mental illness, said Lt. David Guerrero. By collaborating with mental health agencies, the Cortland Police Department wants to provide its officers with extensive training to respond appropriately. Officers from the department, as well as from other local police agencies, are attending training this week to form an Emotionally Disturbed Persons Response Team for city law enforcement.

“There are a lot of mental health issues in Cortland, as there are in any community,” said Guerrero.

EDPRTs are based on the crisis intervention team model utilized by police agencies across the

country, which have been successful in reducing injuries to people emotionally disturbed and officers, as well as the number of persons suffering from emotional illnesses being incarcerated, said Guerrero. Cortland’s EDPRT will be commanded by Guerrero and will consist of a sergeant and six patrol officers, who are undergoing 40 hours of training across five days this week. They will then be available to be dispatched to incidents involving individuals experiencing mental health issues, consult with other officers handling such incidents and work closely with mental health professionals to provide services to those in need.

“It worked out. We asked for volunteers; it was not a thing we forced anyone to do, but we got a lot of interest,” said Guerrero. “We hope to see it grow at some point.” The patrol officers are split among three separate shifts, so two can always be on hand to assist in reports of someone who might be acting out from schizophrenia, multiple personalities syndrome, or severe depression and to be counseled or referred to a professional.

Guerrera hopes this will cut down on emergency calls as officers follow up with problem cases to make sure they are taking medication and getting the proper help. He believes the training will track those with mental illness away from the criminal justice system and toward mental health services. Without financial assistance and donated instruction from the Cortland County Department of Mental Health and other community groups, Guerrero said the training would not have been possible. Retired Rochester Police Sgt. Eric Weaver and local mental health agencies lead the training. Besides city police, participants include the SUNY Cortland University Police, Syracuse University Police Department, and the Homer Police Department. Weaver said Cortland’s was the only new team being

formed as a result of the training, and that other officers were attending to benefit from the discussion panels and presentations.

“There are a lot of resources in the community. It’s just a matter of bringing them together so no one falls through the cracks,” said Weaver, who added that the training was to enable officers to guide those who need help to overcome their hesitation and seek it. Jason Stepkovitch, clinical director of Cortland County Mental Health, said during a morning session on Wednesday that helping patients overcome the stigmatizing behind mental health issues is a big part of his job. “They’re not different from any other physical illness,” he said. “It would be a real help if you guys could spend a minute or two telling them what the clinic is and what they should expect.”

Topics during the various seminars and panels include medications, local mental health resources, mental hygiene law and police stress. The training emphasizes the importance of collaboration between first responders and mental health professionals, Guerrera said. Cortland Police Officer Andy San Jule brought up the issue of adolescents and young adults seemingly aggravated reliance on medication.

“At the colleges every student has three or four different pill containers,” he said during a comment session. “Twenty years ago you never saw a commercial on prime time (television) for depression. Now parents see it’s on TV, so maybe it’s OK.” Stepkovitch agreed that too many see prescription medications as a cure-all. “There is an enormous pressure to immediately fix the problem. Patients come in a lot of the time now expecting a pharmacological cure, but they’re not meant to treat life problems. Don’t come to me expecting Xanax after you get in a fight with your girlfriend,” he said.

Weaver called it a “double-edged sword,” saying on the other hand that there are those with legitimate psychological issues who are in need of significant medication. The Cortland Police Department will have the fourth EDPRT in New York state, following the cities of Rochester, Troy and Binghamton, Guerrera said. Training continues all week at 9 Main St., the Beard Building, with a graduation ceremony scheduled for 2:15 p.m. Friday.

June 12, 2019

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## **Cortlandville Hosting 7th Annual Emotionally Disturbed Response Training**



PHOTO | Family Counseling Services–Linnay Harmer, from Cortland Prevention Resources, speaks to participants in the EDPRT School held in March 2016.)

Cortlandville this week is the site of the seventh annual Emotionally Disturbed Persons Response Team (EDPRT) training, bringing in 16 participants from various police agencies in Cortland and Onondaga Counties, as well as State Police. This week-long training gives officers the skills to successfully work with persons in crisis who have serious emotional needs, mental health conditions, or may be suicidal.

Last year, Cortland Police had over 300 calls for Emotionally Distressed Persons, with over 82% of them responded to by an EDPRT trained officer, which officers say has led to a decrease in use of force and injuries while out on calls.

The lead trainer for the 2019 EDPRT is Eric Weaver, a retired sergeant with the Rochester Police Department, where he served from 1985-2005 as a Mental Health Coordinator and as a coordinator of the EDPRT Basic/Advanced School.

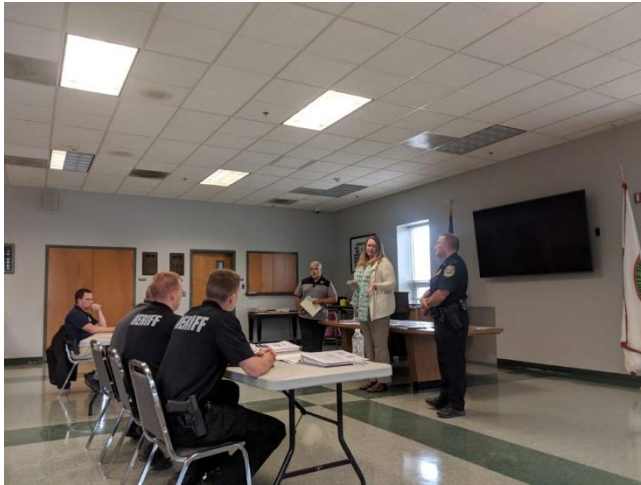
Weaver has served as a consultant in the creation, training, and implementation of similar teams across New York State.

This week's EDPRT school is sponsored by Seven Valleys Health Coalition, Cortland Police Department, CortlandCounty Mental Health Department, Family Counseling Services, and Catholic Charities of Cortland County. The School's graduation will be this Friday afternoon at 3:30 at the Cortlandville Fire Department.

## **Mental Health Training Yields Positive Results for Cortland Police Department** **By SARAH BULLOCK**

When Lt. David Guerrero first agreed seven years ago to send officers to a training on how to interact with emotionally disturbed people, he had no idea the class would help to reduce the department's use of force by up to 20 percent.

The city police department is dispatched to respond to an emotionally overwhelmed or mentally ill person about once a day, Guerrero said, and he thought the training could help officers respond effectively.



Susan Williams, Assistant Director for the Seven Valleys Health Coalition, and Lt. David Guerrero with the Cortland Police Department speak during an Emotionally Disturbed Persons Response Team (EDPRT) class for local and regional law enforcement personnel and first responders. (Sarah Bullock/Cortland Voice)

“It was 15 years since I had two days of mental illness training,” said Guerrero, remembering the training he received at the police academy.

After a class of officers graduated from this year's training on Friday, about 90 percent of the city patrol officers can boast they successfully completed 40 hours of mental and emotional health training, Guerrero said. Since the training began in 2012, the department's use of force statistics dropped by 17-20 percent, a third of calls no longer result in hospitalization and no officers have been injured in a confrontation, he said. Guerrero is most proud of the department's increased proactive measures: officers will visit individuals earmarked by the Department of Social Services as vulnerable over the weekend to make sure they are OK and follow up with people involved with a mental health call officers are dispatched on.

The training is led by Eric Weaver, a retired Rochester Police Department sergeant, pastor and counselor, who focuses on mental and emotional health, response and crisis prevention.

Weaver explained to the officers, that included members of the City Police, Sheriff's Office, SUNY Cortland University Police Department and State Police, that one in five Americans live with some form of mental illness. The National Institute of Mental Health notes the statistic amounts to 46.7 million U.S. citizens as of 2017 and includes those with mild to severe symptoms. One in 20 people experience thoughts of suicide each week in the United States, Weaver noted.

The training also addressed common misperceptions about mental health issues, such as the belief it is better not to ask someone if they are suicidal directly in case you might give them the idea to commit suicide.

“You can't put an idea in someone's head just by asking a question,” Weaver said. The notion that mental toughness prevents depression and other mental illnesses is also false, he said.

The most common form of mental illness is anxiety and the least common is schizophrenia, Weaver noted. It is possible to recover from mental illness and the most effective resolutions come from a combination of medications, therapy and treatment.

A complicating issue is the occurrence of drug use and mental illness at the same time, and some drug abuse symptoms mimic other mental illness symptoms, Weaver noted.

“Good communication skills are most effective when dealing with an (emotionally disturbed person),” Weaver counseled the officers, adding slowing down and talking honestly with an individual is key. Most mentally ill people are not violent and simply need a person with an open mind, a caring attitude and helpful support, he said. “Mental illness is not a crime,” Weaver said. “It is a medical condition.”

Weaver’s three main points as he ended his training were simple: each person is of immense value, no one is alone and honesty with yourself and others is invaluable.

Patrolman Ben Locke of the Cortland Police Department said the training was one of the most productive and informative he has ever been to. “It’s eye-opening to see all of the signs and indications that come with mental illness,” Locke said, adding that the majority of people the police interact with may be suffering from mental illness or substance abuse.

Locke found the training on how to talk with people in a calm manner and how to use strategies to diffuse situations with words before using physical restraints or force “very important.”

“Because we’re all trying to achieve the same goal — get these people help,” he said. “Doing it in a way that’s not so dangerous for them, not so dangerous for us, is a plus.”

Locke said he’s always been a “big talker” to those he encounters and was happy to learn the new techniques, but cautioned that not every conversation will successfully diffuse a situation and sometimes a hands-on approach is needed.

But using the training to talk with an individual in distress is preferable, he noted.

“...Diffusing with words rather than hands on is better for everyone,” Locke said.

As useful as the training strategies are, the most important thing Locke said he learned about was empathy — a trait Greek scholar Euripedes described as, “When a good man is hurt all who would be called good must suffer with him.”

Kaitlyn Bliss, a corrections officer with the Cortland County Sheriff’s Department, agreed. “This definitely changes my perspective a lot on how I do my job,” said Bliss, who works in the Cortland County Correctional Facility. “They’re not all bad people. They may have mental illness.”

The training also helped Bliss see the hope for recovery that always exists, but isn’t always apparent.

“If you’re in a dark place, everything (Weaver’s) saying is correct. There’s a way out,” Bliss said. “We just have to ask for help and that’s hard for some people.”

The total cost of the 40-hour training for all 15 officers is about \$8,500 and is usually paid through grants, said Susan Williams, Assistant Director of the Seven Valleys Health Coalition and training organizer. The Cortland County police departments are not charged for the training, but if an officer from an agency

outside of the county wanted to attend, a fee would be attached, she said. There was one state police officer from Camillus at last week's training, Williams noted.

This year, grant funding is not yet located for the training so the Seven Valleys Health Coalition is floating the money until funding can be secured, Williams said. The first year the training was held, Seven Valleys partnered with Catholic Charities, Cortland County Mental Health Coalition and Family Counseling Services to pay for the training, she said. The four agencies initially pulled together because they saw the value in the training, Williams said. The Cortlandville Fire Department also donates its department's training room, which keeps costs low, she said.

In addition to learning about how to address the emotions and mental health needs of others, officers learned how to deal with their own emotions and issues. Police officers are particularly prone to certain types of mental health issues because of the demands of their jobs, such as the build up of unresolved stress called cumulative stress and post-traumatic stress disorder.

"If you see each other struggling in any way," Weaver said, as he ended the training, "sometimes we're the only ones we got."