HEALTH

➤ continued from A1

"If I feel that you're mentally unstable enough that you're going to hurt yourself or possibly someone else, then I have the authority to place a 72-hour health and welfare hold on you," Froemke said.

Once that hold is placed, Froemke said the person is taken into law enforcement custody, where they will be seen by a mental health professional.

According to Prairie St. Johns Hospital in Fargo, a secure mental health facility, a patient is then examined and admitted to a facility if the "doctor agrees that the patient is mentally ill, chemically dependent or developmentally disabled and finds the patient is in danger of harming self or others if not immediately detained."

How far is it?

These secure mental health facilities are in short supply in Minnesota, so law enforcement officials often drive all over the state to find a bed for a patient. According to data provided by Froemke, the sheriff's office did 121 transports in 2013, which jumped to 148 transports in 2014.

Perhaps more alarmingly than the rise in the number of transports is the increase in average trip distance and time, Froemke said.

"The beds are far and few between, we've went as far as Owatonna," Froemke said. "Almost all the way across the state."

In 2013, the average trip time was 7.4 hours, which increased to 9.4 hours in 2014. The average trip length increased from 369 miles in 2013 to 385 miles in 2014. However, as of Feb. 25 of this year, those numbers are already jumping again.

After only 56 days of 2015, the Koochiching County Sheriff's Office has performed 20 transports for a total of 10,000 miles.

"It's a statewide epidemic, this is not just Koochiching County," Froemke said.

What a transport is like

A mental health transport isn't a college spring break road trip, and a longer drive puts added stress on both the patient and the person doing the transport, Froemke said.

"You're trying to keep this person calm, you're taking them to the restroom, getting them something to eat, if they need that," he said. "So there's a lot of responsibility there for the transport drivers."

Most patients remain calm, Froemke said, though many are put in handcuffs as a precaution.

"If they've been extremely agitated and they're still kind of ramped up, we will have to restrain them if need be," he said.

International Falls Police Chief Mike Musich said he performed some mental health transfers earlier in his career. The driver doesn't want to stop much, he said, and has to be prepared for anything.

"You take more precautions than back in the old days, back when we used to do it," he said. "A lot of times the person might not have been handcuffed back then."

IFPD Capt. Tom Lynch said the situation can be different each time. One instance could involve a cooperative, complacent person, he said, or someone who's the complete opposite.

"That also will heighten your alertness and your senses, depending on they type of person you're transporting," Lynch said.

Hidden costs

Longer transports mean more costs to the taxpayer, Froemke said. A trip to Owatonna requires an overnight motel stay, he said, which is an added cost. There's also a minimum of two court hearings the patient has to attend, which results in multiple trips back and forth.

"We've got to go get them and bring them back, for usually about an hour court appearance, and then we bring them back," Froemke said.

The department hired temporary transport drivers so deputies aren't tied up doing transports. However, sometimes transports happen more frequently, which results in staffing issues, he said.

"We had three in one day, and the closest one was to Anoka," Froemke said. "Then if I have to, I have to utilize one of our part-time deputies."

Those drivers need cars to drive, though, and with two transport cars available, Froemke said they sometimes have to use a squad car for transports. Driving two cars across the state every week also wears them out faster, he said.

"Both of our cars now are going to need to be replaced probably in the next year or two," he said. "You've got to change the oil every 3,000 miles on these cars, tires, it all adds up."

Over in Beltrami County, Sheriff Phil Hodapp said many of his department's transfers end up going out-of-state to facilities in North Dakota.

"That's a shame, because our tax dollars are going out of the state," Hodapp said.

Symptoms of a bigger issue

When mental health facilities closed en masse across the nation decades ago, Hodapp said, that created a shortage of beds for people who need them.

"Since the closure of mental institutions nationwide, the place of last resort has been county jails," he said.

Since 1980, Hodapp said, the Beltrami County daily jail population has increased 600 percent. Over the same time period, he said, the county population has only gone up 50 percent. In 1980, there was rarely someone with mental illness in the Beltrami County jail. Now, 70-80 percent of the jail population has some form of mental illness.

"The justice system has criminalized mental illness," Hodapp said. "There's been no resources at the local level after the closures of the state hospitals. The way it's dealt with has evolved into arresting them and throwing them in jail for their behavior."

When hospitals don't have psychiatric wings, Hodapp said, there's no facility to go to for a person who's decompensating, which is commonly referred to as a "mental breakdown."

"The jail isn't a mental health care facility, but it's turned into the largest mental health facility in a lot of counties," he said.

Froemke said when he tracks Koochiching County's mental health transports, he's noticed 35 percent of the transports involve "repeat customers."

Is there a solution?

Law enforcement officials are working throughout the state with doctors, social workers, teachers, judges, prosecutors and lawmakers to try and find a solution to the mental health crisis.

The solution is simple to figure out, Froemke said. But finding a way to achieve that goal is more complicated than it seems.

"They need more beds and they need more mental health professionals as they can to help these people," he said.

Like with many things, Froemke said, finding a solution comes down to funding. Awareness of the issue is there, he said, but it still takes money.

"It's the financial end of it," Froemke said. "Where does the money come from?"

One place that money could come from is a bill in the state Legislature, which if passed, would create four regional "jail diversion hubs," short-term treatment centers for people with mental illness.

In the end, the issue can be boiled down to supply and demand. The demand for treatment facilities is greatly outweighing the supply, Froemke said.

"If we had even a 10-bed facility in International Falls, it would be full 24/7," Froemke said. "There's no doubt in my mind."

The next part of this series focuses on what doctors, social workers and health care professionals are doing to confront the mental health crisis.

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