

## Iowa's Mental Health Care Crisis:

Armed with court orders and thick skins, deputies try to rescue mentally ill Iowans

STORY BY: TONY LEYS

PHOTOS AND VIDEOS BY: KELSEY KREMER

DIGITAL PRESENTATION BY: AMBER EATON

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The troubled young woman understood immediately why the two Polk County sheriff's deputies had come looking for her at Des Moines' main homeless shelter.

The 19-year-old recognized the uniformed men. They had tracked her down before, and she knew they weren't planning to arrest her.

They'd come to take her to Broadlawns Medical Center for drug-abuse treatment. They had a court order saying she had to go with them to the county hospital for help. Her family had requested the order, fearing she was a danger to herself.

She reacted with fury.

"I'm not going to f---ing Broadlawns!" she snapped at the senior deputy, Sgt. Jeff Rullman. Residents and staff members gathered nearby in the homeless shelter's lobby, watching as the young woman unleashed her frustration and fear in a string of curses.



Deputy John Parks, of the Polk County sheriff's department, waits outside the home of a person who was issued a court-ordered mental-health assessment Wednesday, April 25, 2018, in the suburbs of Des Moines. Parks was there to serve the order and bring the person to the hospital. Kelsey Kremer/Staff Photo

The burly deputies stood quietly as the small woman vented. The deputies have been the target of such anger plenty of times. Any cop who couldn't hold his temper would wash out of this duty right away, the deputies said.

Rullman and his partner, Deputy John Parks, are part of a four-deputy team the Polk County Sheriff's Office has assigned to work with central Iowans struggling with serious mental illness or life-threatening addictions.

The specialized team is a response to the increased burden law enforcement agencies face in trying to make America's frayed mental health system function. The team helps get people into treatment before they spiral further out of control and wind up arrested for behavior rooted in their mental struggles.

[The sheriff's department estimates](#) at least 40 percent of the approximately 1,000 people in the Polk County Jail on any given day are taking medication for mental illness. [A recent federal report](#) found that 26 percent of people in American jails and 14 percent of people in prison had suffered "serious psychological distress" in the previous 30 days. That's compared to 5 percent of people in the general population.

The four deputies pick up about 900 patients per year for court-ordered treatment, triple the number from 15 years ago. No one with a broken arm, a heart attack or other physical medical emergency would expect armed law officers to pick them up in a squad car. But it's become routine for people with serious mental health issues.

The sheriff's department agreed to let a Register reporter ride along with the mental health unit over several months, on condition that the people the deputies picked up not be identified without their permission.

## **'I don't blame you for being upset'**

Rullman and Parks could have brought the situation with the angry, homeless woman to a quick conclusion.

The court order gave them the authority to put her in handcuffs and haul her to a waiting patrol vehicle for the ride to the hospital.

Instead, they stood in the homeless shelter's lobby as she cursed and insulted them.

"I don't blame you for being upset," Rullman told her. "I get it. But you can't take it out on us."

The woman insisted she didn't need treatment. She said instead of going to the hospital, she'd rather return to jail, where she'd recently been locked up for crack-cocaine possession.

Rullman raised his palm toward her, as a teacher might gesture to a student.

"This is a time when you need to listen to me," he told her. Surely she remembered what happened when he and Parks had taken her to the hospital in the past, he said. The Broadlawns staff tried to help her. "You know they're not going to mistreat you."

The young woman's eyes still flashed anger, but she started asking questions. "When will they let me out — a couple of days? I'm not doing that again," she told Rullman.

Parks chipped in assurances. The court order just said she needed to go to the hospital for an evaluation, he said.

The longest she could be held [under such an order](#) would be five days. Her stay might be shorter. "If you go and they say you're fine, they'll cut you loose," he said.

The young woman asked if she could have a cigarette. The deputies agreed.

Once they were out on the sidewalk, she lit up and took a drag. She looked over at the deputies' Ford Explorer patrol vehicles, which were sitting at the curb with engines running.

"All I have to do is go to the ER, and they'll let me go?" she asked.

Rullman replied that he could only guarantee she could explain her side of the story to the hospital's staff.

"You know I'm not going to give you bull crap, right?" the sergeant said.

She nodded, finished her cigarette and climbed into Parks' Explorer for the 10-minute ride to Broadlawns.

The woman was still grumbling when she arrived at the hospital. She particularly didn't want anyone going through her possessions, which were contained in a garbage bag taken from the homeless shelter.

Parks watched an aide lead the woman into an exam room, where she would change into hospital-issued sweatpants and T-shirt before being taken to the psychiatric unit.

The deputy guessed some illegal drugs might turn up among the woman's belongings. If so, he said, he would dispose of the contraband.

He would not file a criminal charge.

"That wouldn't help her," he said. "That's not what we're trying to do here."

## A busy afternoon

The young homeless woman would be the first of six patients the deputies brought in on that sunny April afternoon.

On some days, the deputies spend fruitless hours searching for people who have shifting addresses and a determination not to be found. They'll knock on doors, look under bridges, question acquaintances — and come up empty.

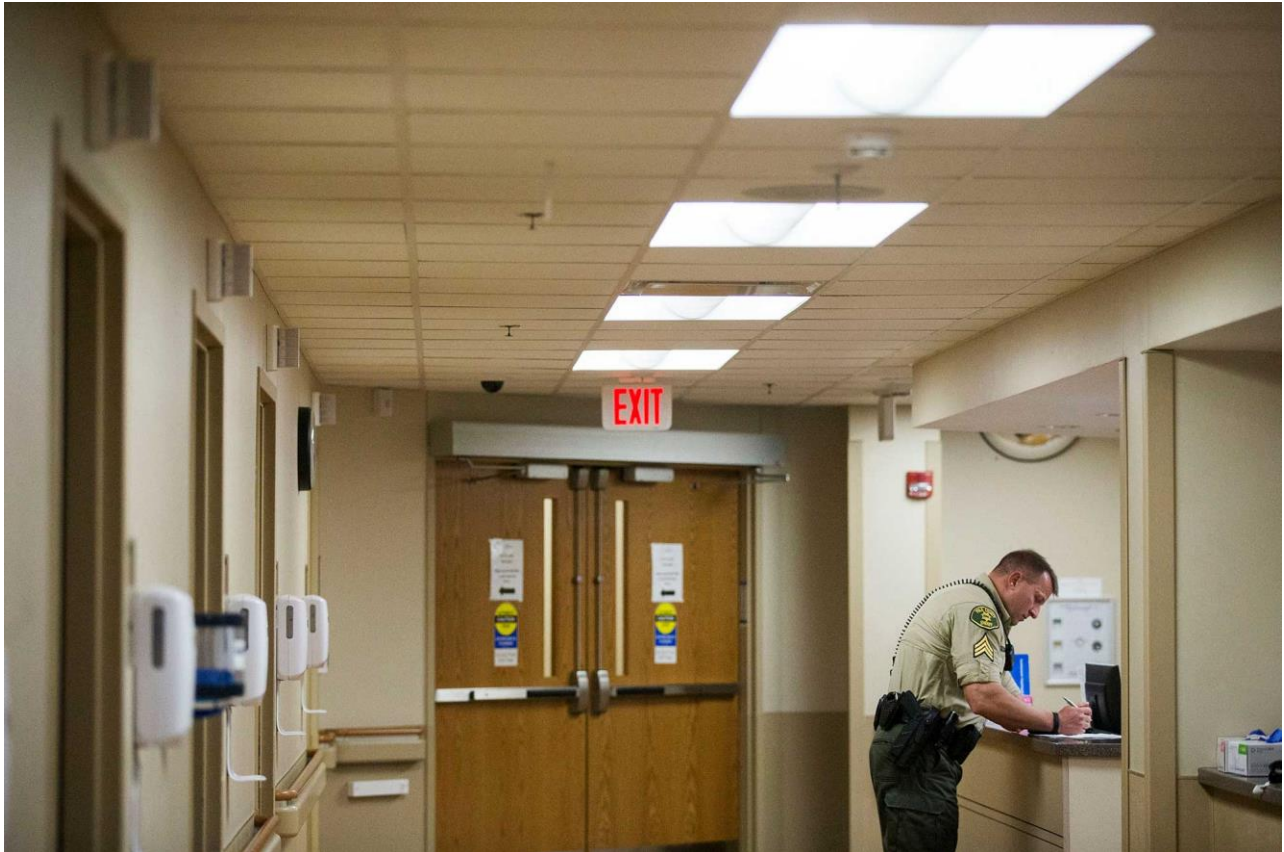
But on this afternoon, they tracked down one troubled person after another.

After persuading the outraged young woman to go to Broadlawns with Parks, Rullman brought in a 27-year-old homeless man who had told shelter workers he intended to kill himself.

The bearded man, who was clad in a camouflage sweatshirt, was nearly catatonic. The deputies couldn't stick around Broadlawns to learn the cause of his lethargy. They needed to take off for Urbandale, to find a 17-year-old girl who'd skipped out on her court-ordered addiction treatment.

When the teen realized Parks was at the front door of her home, she tried to sneak out the back. The deputies had seen that trick before.

Rullman was standing by the back door when the teen stepped out in her stocking feet.



Polk County sheriff's Sgt. Jeff Rullman fills out paperwork after bringing two people in mental-health crisis into Broadlawns Medical Center on Wednesday, April 25, 2018, in Des Moines. Kelsey Kremer/Staff Photo

"Hi," he told the chagrined girl. She walked quietly with him down her family's driveway to the waiting patrol vehicle for a ride downtown to Mercy Medical Center.

After handing off the Urbandale teen at Mercy, the deputies headed to a Des Moines middle school to find a 13-year-old boy who needed both mental health and drug abuse treatment.



The boy's court order was accompanied by a warning, which Rullman read aloud from his smartphone: "Known to carry weapons, guns included," the warning said. Then he looked up. "Wow, at 13," he said.

School staff members had been alerted the deputies were coming, and they'd pulled the boy aside. He came along peacefully.

By the end of the day, Rullman and Parks also tracked down a 30-year-old man and a 19-year-old man who needed to be brought to Broadlawns for mental health assessments, and they served committal papers to a 47-year-old woman and a 67-year-old woman who already were at Iowa Lutheran Hospital.

## **'I've never seen them lose their cool'**

Many of the people the deputies pick up have been through the process repeatedly. But it's still nerve-racking.

"They come in a Polk County sheriff's car, so it kind of scares you. You don't know if something happened to your family, or if you got in trouble, or what the situation is," said Matt Lane of West Des Moines, who estimates he's experienced the routine a dozen times in the past six years.

Lane, 30, has schizophrenia and other mental issues, which are controlled with medications most of the time. He sometimes slips off track if he stops taking his medicine or if his prescriptions need adjustment.

*"They come in a Polk County sheriff's car, so it kind of scares you. You don't know if something happened to your family, or if you got in trouble, or what the situation is."*-- Matt Lane of West Des Moines

When his delusions flare up, he thinks people are spying on him, or he sees phantom lights in the air. It's a frightening feeling, making him anxious and irritable.

His family, fearing for his safety, will sign papers seeking a court-ordered mental evaluation. A magistrate will sign the order, and the deputies will come looking for Lane.

He isn't always glad to see them.

"A few times, I've given them some crap, because I didn't want to go," he said. "I've never seen them lose their cool."

The last time the deputies came for Lane, about two months ago, he was out of control and refused to come with them. They had to put him in handcuffs, which is rare. He later apologized to the deputies, who he considers friends.

Although most patients wind up going along willingly, some will fight the deputies.

In one such confrontation last year, Parks hurt his shoulder so badly he missed eight months of work.

"It's a very tough job. They see some of the ugliest things," Lane said. He believes the tension would escalate into fights more often if the duty was left to everyday police officers who didn't know the people being picked up.

"I feel like a lot more people would get arrested rather than get the mental health care they need," he said.

Lane is particularly close to Deputy Jeff Holliday, who has done this work for 14 of his 23 years on the sheriff's department. Lane recounted how he once complained to Holliday about not having any decent shirts to wear.

"He came over the next day with six or seven of his son's shirts for me. I couldn't believe it," Lane said.



Matt Lane, 30, of West Des Moines, has schizophrenia and has been picked up several times by Polk County sheriff's deputies tasked with bringing people with court-ordered mental health assessment to the hospital Kelsey Kremer/Staff Photo

## 'These people are not criminals'

Holliday, 55, is the longest-serving member of the Polk County sheriff's mental health team. When he joined the team, it had just two deputies, one of whom often was assigned other duties.

The team now includes Holliday, Rullman, Parks and Deputy Austin Dagenais, all of whom volunteered for the full-time duty. Their caseload has more than tripled since Holliday started in 2004.

The job isn't for everyone, he said: "If you have a temper, it won't work. If you take offense at personal attacks, it won't work."

Like all the deputies, Holliday carries a pistol, which he's only fired in training, and a Taser, which he's used just once on a person.

He focuses on the fact that the people he's tracking down are experiencing mental troubles that could happen to anyone. He doesn't want them to feel like they're being arrested.

"These people are not criminals," he said. "They haven't done anything wrong. They're people in need of our assistance."

Bringing people in for court-ordered treatment isn't the deputies' sole duty. They also provide security at a threadbare courtroom at Broadlawns Medical Center, where commitment hearings are held several days a week.

In the hearings, magistrates listen to testimony from psychiatrists, families and the patients before deciding whether the patients should be held for treatment longer than the few days covered by an initial evaluation order.

*"These people are not criminals. They haven't done anything wrong. They're people in need of our assistance."*-- Deputy Jeff Holliday

The deputies also routinely spend hours on the highway, shuttling Polk County mental health

patients back and forth to faraway hospitals and treatment facilities. They have to do that when all the programs in Des Moines are full — which is often.

## **Patience can last for months**

One of the team's toughest cases came last year, after a young woman named Jenny fled the Des Moines house she had shared with her longtime boyfriend, leaving everything but her keys and her phone.

The Register is not using her last name because doing so would identify him.

Her boyfriend, who is in his 20s, had stopped taking medication for his schizophrenia, and his behavior had become erratic.

When Jenny told him she was moving out, he declared he would shoot anyone who came to the house to help her retrieve her belongings, she said.

Jenny took her former boyfriend's threat seriously because he was an avid hunter who owned several guns. She and the young man's aunt filed court papers to have him brought to the hospital for a mental health assessment, but the sheriff's deputies decided not to rush in and try to grab him.

"They didn't want to shoot a person who was mentally ill, and they didn't want to get shot," she said.

Jenny, a social worker who works as a mental health therapist, met with Holliday at a coffee shop to talk over what to do. He told her the deputies would wait to see if her former boyfriend would come out on his own. Holliday was determined to take him in peacefully.



*Photos: Deputies play an important role helping with mental health*

"The cops easily could have said, 'Well, if he wants to kill himself, that's on him,'" she said.

The young man holed up in the house for seven months. His sole connection to his family was when his parents would shove food through the mail slot.

By last fall, water service to the house had been shut off because of unpaid bills.

Then deputies and the family came up with a plan to get the young man out.

His father went to the house and used a key to open the front door, with Holliday standing off to the side, out of sight.

Other deputies were waiting nearby. The young man charged through the doorway, pushing his father out onto the porch.

Holliday pounced on the younger man, and the other deputies helped tackle him in the yard. The team took the mentally ill man to Broadlawns for an assessment and treatment.

After about two months of inpatient hospital treatment, the man was placed in a residential program to recover. Without the patience and persistence of Holliday and the other deputies, he probably would have died, Jenny said. "I can't put into words how important this squad is," she said. "It was all really complicated. Jeff was so patient. He listened to my tears and my frustrations. I was like, 'What do I do?' He was phenomenal."



## 'Why are we doing this with cops?'

Many mental health advocates would like to see less interaction between law-enforcement officers and people with mental illnesses.

"We need to say, 'Why are we doing this with cops when this is a medical issue?'" said John Snook, executive director of the Treatment Advocacy Center, a national group pushing for more access to help for people with mental illnesses.

Snook hopes to someday see an ample supply of mental health professionals who could take the lead in such situations, with law enforcement officers standing by in cases that could turn violent.

In the meantime, Snook applauds efforts such as the Polk County sheriff's designation of a specially trained mental health team of deputies.

Although it's a good idea, he said, the fact that the department needs such a team is a shame. It highlights how many people are going without mental health care until they spiral into crises requiring court-ordered treatment, he said.

"It's a sign of how broken the system is."

All police agencies are wrestling with the problem, Snook added. "You will not find a jailer who wouldn't say they're drowning in mental health issues now."

## **Evolving attitudes**

Many cops had tougher attitudes about mental health issues in past decades, veteran officers say.

When Tim Krum started with the Polk County Sheriff's Office in 1992, deputies tended to see picking up people for mental health treatment as a nuisance. Deputies would try to get the task done as quickly as possible, so they could get back to what they saw as their real jobs.

"We'd grab them and cuff them and get them in the car and take them to Broadlawns," recalled Krum, who is now one of the department's top commanders.

Even today, few Iowa sheriff's departments are large enough to field specialized mental health units like Polk County's. In rural areas, deputies have to be jacks of all trades.

"In some counties, they do everything from getting the roadkill off the road to investigating homicides," said Craig Matzke, a retired Polk

County sheriff's sergeant who trains law officers in handling people with mental illness.

The president of the Iowa State Sheriffs' and Deputies Association, Josh Hammen, said the issue is increasingly taxing on small departments. Hammen is a deputy sheriff in Pocahontas County, a rural area in north-central Iowa.

His department has just seven members, including the sheriff. All of them share the duty of picking up residents for court-ordered treatment and shuttling them to faraway counties when nearby treatment programs are full.

Although small sheriffs' departments are more strapped for resources, their deputies are less likely to be viewed as strangers to residents in crisis, Hammen said. "Very seldom do I go pick up somebody who I don't already know. And if I don't know them, they probably know me," he said.

Since 2013, all Iowa law enforcement officers have been required to take at least four hours of training on mental health issues every four years. The subject also has become an integral part of training for new recruits.



Deputy Jeff Holliday, of the Polk County Sheriff's department mental health unit, gets ready to transport a patient to another hospital in Iowa, on Wednesday, May 2, 2018, in Des Moines. Kelsey Kremer/Staff Photo

Holliday, the Polk County deputy, often helps teach the lessons. Earlier this year, he spent several hours sharing his expertise with recruits at the Des Moines Police Academy.

The academy had hired actors to portray civilians in mental crises. Holliday watched several pairs of recruits take turns coming into a room, where an actor in her 50s was weeping. The woman sat on a conference table, which represented a window ledge.

The police recruits spoke softly to the woman as they eased their way toward her one step at a time. They asked her name and what was troubling her. She told them her husband had died, leaving her alone. "He took care of me!"

she wailed in a chilling portrayal of grief. "Now there's no one to take care of me!"

The recruits sought subjects for conversation with her. They asked about the woman's dog, and then about her adult son, who she told them lived in Boston. They offered to call the son so she could talk to him.

The woman suddenly stood on the table, then stepped away from the recruits and toward the edge. One of the recruits instinctively lunged to grab her. Afterward, Holliday corrected the recruit, saying his abrupt movement could have startled the suicidal woman into leaping.

The deputy praised the recruits afterward for steadily trying to draw the woman into conversation. But he said one of them made a mistake in telling her that he knew she was a strong person. The recruit's assertion was meant to be reassuring. But it set the woman into another round of weeping. "I'm not strong. I'm weak!" she sobbed, repeating that she wanted to die.

Holliday told the recruits people they encounter will sense if an officer is being insincere, including if they say a distressed stranger is a strong person. "You don't know that. You don't know her," he said.

The veteran deputy, who learned most such lessons on his own, told the recruits that an officer's main role with a distraught person is to listen. The officer needs to set aside the commanding voice and posture police often use to gain control of a situation, he said.

"We want you to ask a question, then pause. Ask a question, then pause," he advised. "Use a calm voice — not authoritative. Not in this situation. Calm."

When he was done teaching the lesson, he headed back onto the streets, looking to prevent tragedies.

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## ABOUT TONY LEYS



Tony Leys has been a Des Moines Register staff member since 1988. He grew up in the Milwaukee area and graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He spent 10 years as a Register assignment editor before returning to reporting in 2000. Since then, he has mostly covered health care issues, including Iowa's mental health system. He serves on the national board of the Association of Health Care Journalists. As a Register reporter, he has traveled to Afghanistan, Guatemala, Haiti, Mali and Uganda.

## **Mental health commitments**

Iowa families seeking court-ordered mental health treatment for loved ones must file formal papers with their county clerk of court office.

To gain such an order, two people must sign notarized statements saying the person has a mental disorder that poses immediate danger to themselves or others. A doctor can be one of the two people signing the statements seeking the order.

Once the formal request is filed, a magistrate will determine whether to sign an order requiring the person be brought to a hospital for an evaluation and treatment.

According to the Polk County attorney's office, before committing people, the magistrate must determine they have a mental disorder that makes them lack sufficient judgment to make responsible decisions about their own treatment.

The magistrate also must determine one of these three things is likely to happen if people are allowed to remain at liberty without treatment:

- They are likely to physically injure themselves or others. This must be demonstrated by recent acts or threats.
- They are likely to cause serious emotional injury to family members or others who lack reasonable opportunity to avoid contact with them.
- They are unable to satisfy their needs for food, clothing, shelter or essential medical care, making it likely they will suffer physical injury, debilitation or death.

Similar rules apply for families wanting someone to be committed for drug-addiction treatment. In Polk County, the clerk of court's office can be reached at 515-286-3666.