

EDITORIAL: Mental illness should not be a death sentence



Sukhwinder Karv, 73, sits by a photograph of her son, Parminder Singh Shergill, during a vigil last year at the Deshmesh Darbar Sikh temple in Lodi. Parminder Singh Shergill was killed by police after he came at them with a knife. Parminder Singh Shergill was a Gulf War veteran and suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and mental illness.

ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE

Parminder Singh Shergill offered his life in service to his adopted country. As an infantryman in Iraq during the Gulf War, the India-born veteran served on the front lines.

By the time he got home to Lodi, he was suffering from severe post-traumatic stress and mental illness. And by the time, almost a year ago, that two Lodi police officers pumped 14 bullets into the 43-year-old man in a raving standoff mere steps from his mother's doorstep, his delusional run-ins with the authorities included 10 calls, mostly from his relatives, asking for help during his psychotic breaks.

His death is a tragedy, and far too familiar to the families of people who suffer from serious mental illness. It's a tragedy, too, for the experienced police officers who killed him, and who, despite being cleared this week of criminal conduct, surely will be haunted forever by what they did.

And what makes it especially awful is that it's a kind of tragedy that we could prevent, if we wanted. A report released last year by the Treatment Advocacy Center and National Sheriffs' Association estimates that half of the people fatally shot by law enforcement officers in the U.S. suffer from mental illness.

Dealing with the breakdowns of severely mentally ill people, in short, is — as it always has been — a fundamental

part of police work. Yet over and over, law enforcement officers prove lethally unable, unwilling or unprepared to handle it.

We accept this as if we think it's OK for police to fail in the face of brain disease. And make no mistake, what happened in Lodi was a sickening failure. It took months to get the department to make the facts of the case public. It's still unclear why it took 14 bullets to stop a lone man with a knife who, depending on the testimony, may or may not have been a real danger to the two policemen.

Maybe the inevitable civil case will shed more light. But one indisputable fact is that, despite the many lives lost and the millions of taxpayer dollars that get paid out each year for these kinds of shootings, we have chosen, so far, to turn a blind eye to this constant problem.

Yes, the skills required to calm down a mentally ill person may be counter-intuitive to standard cop training. So change the training. Police can learn to deal with the mentally ill if we require it.

Police training programs nationwide have proven that crisis intervention techniques can be taught and deployed to head off violent confrontations with mentally ill people. Officers can be equipped with stun guns and other non-lethal weapons.

Mental health professionals can accompany untrained police on calls involving erratic suspects. Body cameras can record such interactions, protecting both police and civilians from questionable testimony later.

In fact, since Shergill's death last January, the Lodi police have incorporated many such policies — proof that they could have done more.

The California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training, which sets minimum requirements for police training, needs to raise the requirements for handling mentally ill civilians. If they won't do it, state lawmakers should step in.

Parminder Singh Shergill offered his life in service to his adopted country. He deserved more from us than this.

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