

Sonoma County mental health services hard to come by outside the '101 corridor'

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For the second time in a little over a month, a Sonoma family that had tried to get help for a troubled son found that the county's health-services response team was unavailable.

Within days of reaching out for help, both families found that a possibly avoidable tragedy struck – in one case with imprisonment and injury, in the other with death.

The fact that both cases shared a Sonoma Valley location may be a factor in the failure of county health services to respond.

According to multiple sources in the Department of Health Services, the county's emergency-response Mobile Support Team currently only operates along the Highway 101 corridor, from Petaluma to Windsor.

That places the Sonoma Valley as well as northern and western Sonoma County out of reach of county emergency health support.

RYAN PRITEL

The most recent episode occurred Saturday, May 12 when Randy Pritel called the county health services to request help in getting his 20-year-old son, Ryan Pritel, treatment, or even confinement, so that he would not harm anyone. He was at first told health services would be able to respond – until he said he lived in Sonoma. He was put on hold, then informed county emergency support was not available in the Sonoma Valley.

"She seemed very troubled that they couldn't send a team," said Randy Pritel, of the woman he spoke to from county health services. "Her advice was for me to make the determination (on his needs) and try to get him to Santa Rosa or call the police."

Pritel had experienced his son's erratic behavior before. "Our family has dedicated ourselves to trying to help Ryan over the years," he said. In October last year, on a visit to Los Angeles County, Ryan began exhibiting what his father called "red flags" – not eating or sleeping, nervousness, showing signs of delusional thinking. L.A. County Health responded, evaluated Ryan and put him in what they called "5150 custody" for a month.

That number refers to California state law section 5150, which states that when a person "as a result of a mental health disorder, is a danger to others, or to himself or herself, or gravely disabled," he or she can be taken into custody for a period of up to 72 hours for evaluation and safety.

For Ryan, that period of evaluation led to longer-term treatment. When he was released after a month, he was much better, said his father. He recently had moved out on his own for the first time, sharing a place in the Springs with a friend. He had a steady job at the Jolly Washer five days a week, and he seemed to be improving.

But he returned home the previous Tuesday, May 8, showing the same red-flag behavior he had in Los Angeles. His father finally called county health on Saturday. "When the mental health team in L.A. County came out, there were mental health therapists who made the assessment. That's what I thought I was going to be able to ask for here," said Randy Pritel.

Finding support was not available to come to Sonoma, Pritel decided to leave his son alone in hopes he would "come back to himself," as he had done before.

The next day, May 13, Ryan Pritel took a gun to work at the Jolly Washer car wash on Highway 12. His employers called the Sheriff's department – and when deputies arrived a shoot-out ensued, culminating in non-fatal injuries to a deputy, Mike Matelli. The younger Pritel was arrested and booked into the Sonoma County jail on charges of attempted murder and carrying a loaded firearm. Bail is set at \$1 million.

Ryan Pritel is still incarcerated, and is being represented by the public defender's office. A court doctor's report on Pritel's mental competence is due June 7, and a hearing is scheduled for June 13.

"We are so sorry for what happened to the police officer," said the older Pritel. "Our entire family is grateful he is recovering at home, and wish him and his family well."

ROD CAMERON

The first incident took place over a month earlier, when Rod Cameron was staying with his mother, Jude Cameron, at her Sonoma Oaks Mobile Park home (which is entered down the street that adjoins the gas station and car wash where Pritel was arrested). She told the Index-Tribune that her 44-year-old son had been having mental health problems for almost 25 years, ever since experiencing a breakdown while in National Guard training in Panama at age 21. Before that he had not had problems, Mrs. Cameron said – she had worked as a psychiatric social worker in Boston many years earlier – but the onset of mental illness in early adulthood is common.

Over the years he continued to struggle with his mental health, including being admitted several times to psychiatric facilities.

"He's a very smart guy and appears just fine, until an episode," said his mother, speaking in the present tense of her late son. "When he knows he's in trouble, he tries to isolate."

A couple months ago, while he was going through a divorce, Rod Cameron was staying at his mother's mobile home at the Sonoma Oaks park while she was in Mexico. While she was away, a friend of hers called to say sounds were coming from her trailer, as if he were breaking things and shouting. She told the friend to call the police. It wasn't the first time deputies had responded to reports of Rod Cameron's troubling behavior.

On two subsequent occasions, Rod Cameron had even called the police himself to say people were outside threatening to kill him. The Sonoma Police, whose officers are deputies in the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office, responded but did not take action.

Sgt. Jason Craver of the Sonoma Police Department confirmed the calls. "We were called to check his welfare and each time he was evaluated to determine if he met the criteria to be taken for mandatory evaluation."

Elaborated Craver: "Many people we encounter fall somewhere within the spectrum of 'mental health disorder' but do not necessarily meet the criteria of danger to self or danger to others."

Mrs. Cameron returned from Mexico and decided the best way to help Rod was keep him at her home, where "he felt safe," she said.

On March 28, hours after visiting a psychiatrist for blood tests and medication, according to his mother, Rod Cameron lost it. Neighbors reported to police that the immense, 320-pound man was roaming the neighborhood naked, punching out decorative street lights with his bare hands and screaming.

Responding deputies twice called for backup and, after administering three Taser shocks and restraining him with handcuffs and a nylon cord wrapped around his ankles, seven deputies finally managed to get Cameron under control.

Then they noticed he had stopped breathing. They administered CPR and took him to Sonoma Valley Hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

CRISIS INTERVENTION

Both the Pritel and Cameron incidents are being investigated by the Santa Rosa Police Department, as a neutral law-enforcement agency outside of the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office. But crisis intervention is part of any law enforcement officer's job, and they do receive training for it.

"Every deputy goes through a 32-hour crisis intervention training academy dealing with people in crisis situations and mental health disorders," said Sgt. Spencer Crum, public information officer of the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office. "We have trained over 500 law enforcement officers over the last 10 years."

For people in mental health crises or their families, calling the police is not necessarily the first thing that comes to mind. Instead they might call the county's 24-hour Access Line, at the emergency number 565-6900 – as Randy Pritel did. For many Sonoma County residents, however, mobile services are unavailable.

The Mobile Support Team (or MST) is described as "a partnership with the Santa Rosa Police Department and the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office" on the county website, staffed by "licensed mental health clinicians, certified substance abuse specialists, post-graduate registered interns" and others. It is contacted through the county's 24-hour Access Line, or a law enforcement officer can ask for their support.

If the MST is not available for response, callers are asked if they can get the concerned party to the hospital or to Santa Rosa for evaluation – and, if not, told to call the Sheriff's office.

Andrew Leonard, the interim communication manager for the Department of Health Services, reported that the budget for fiscal year 2017-18 for the MST program is \$1,473,084. The funds come out of the county budget – but many residents in Sonoma County are not direct beneficiaries of the mobile services of the program, unless they live in that Highway 101 corridor.

"I have been a consistent advocate for expanding the mobile crisis support team to areas outside of the Highway 101 corridor," 1st District Supervisor Susan Gorin said. "It is expensive, but just as importantly, the mental health

resources may not be readily available on an emergency basis in areas outside of the corridor.”

Understandably, no program can accommodate all contingencies. Gorin noted that in the case of Cameron, the event unfolded so quickly that a support team coming from Santa Rosa would not have had time to arrive in any case.

And both Gorin and Dr. Michael Kozart, the interim director of the Behavioral Health division (in which the MST operates), pointed out that the MST cannot go into a situation unless it is safe for clinicians.

Calling this a “very tumultuous time” at the county health department, Kozart said, “The most challenging and sad reality is the limitation we face around involuntary treatment.”

“Ultimately, our ability to treat involuntary folks is vastly limited, compared to treating voluntary folks,” said Kozart.

Kozart described it as a “sad reality... that the only time you can get help is when you’re so sick you get a 5150 (evaluation) and are brought in.”

Jude Cameron only wishes the deputies that fateful night had been aware they were dealing with a mental-health case.

“He looked upon the police as I do, as protectors,” she said. She wondered why police don’t carry medication that will calm or sedate mentally ill people like her son. Or why a health care professional isn’t on call to ride along with police in such calls.

“There must be a better way,” she said.

In Sonoma Valley, that better way has yet to arrive.

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