

MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL - EDITORIAL | DONTRE HAMILTON  
Dontre Hamilton Tragedy Demands Reform of Mental Health Care, Training  
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It's a tragedy that Dontre Hamilton — who had schizophrenia, heard voices and was afraid to sleep in his room — went to get some rest in Red Arrow Park instead.

It's a tragedy that officer Christopher Manney had little training in dealing with mental illness when he answered a call about a man sleeping in the park and started to frisk Hamilton.

It's a tragedy that the man struggling with mental health issues woke up frightened at the man frisking him and lashed out in his fear. It's a tragedy that Manney responded to Hamilton's reaction by shooting him.

It's a tragedy that, because of recent police shooting incidents in Ferguson, Mo., and elsewhere, this is perceived as an issue of race — a white officer overreacting and shooting a defenseless black man to death.

We don't discount race as a factor — this most segregated community certainly has much work to do on that issue. But there is a significant failure here, too, in how Milwaukee County has been treating people with the most severe mental illnesses — in truth, not treating them — and forcing police officers to be the people on the front lines of that "treatment." As reported in Journal Sentinel's "Chronic Crisis" series, Milwaukee has the worst record in the nation when it comes to emergency detentions, waiting until patients are so sick they become dangerous and are often brought to hospitals by police in handcuffs.

The failure is also about how, despite having its police on the front lines of mental illness more than any other city, Milwaukee made short-shrift of training officers to deal with people with severe mental illness, unlike Houston, a much larger city. Houston didn't fix its problem until two people with schizophrenia were shot within two months, forcing the city to look long and hard at its problem.

It doesn't make it any easier for the people who loved Dontre Hamilton or for those who love Christopher Manney, an officer who surely didn't go to the park wanting to fire his gun. Sometimes it takes tragedy to prompt progress.

In response to a strong push from Hamilton's family, Mayor Tom Barrett said Dec. 11 that the training will happen for all of Milwaukee's officers. The expanded training will fulfill a pledge he and then-Police Chief Nanette Hegerty made in 2004 in response to a similar police shooting. A report from the Mental Health Task Force, which they served on, titled "A Critical Juncture" promised all officers would be trained in mental health to improve their crisis intervention skills.

At the time, all officers got just a few hours of training. That was insufficient. A Crisis Intervention Team program requires 40 hours of training, which is what Milwaukee officers will now receive. It's about time.

Milwaukee County, too, is moving in the right direction toward a new system of mental health care based on community-based facilities, which the "Chronic Crisis" series demonstrated is superior to the current dysfunctional system based on the Mental Health Complex. But, there, too, movement has been too slow.

Milwaukee aldermen weighed in last week with a series of additional reforms for the Police Department, including the creation of a community advisory council to advise the Police Department on strategies for maintaining community-police relations; reviewing diversity training provided to officers and possibly seeking a new contractor to provide the training, expanding the Fire and Police Commission from seven to nine members so that it is more inclusive of the community and equipping each police officer with a body camera to record interactions with the public.

All these ideas are worth discussing. And that discussion should start now — before the next tragedy happens. This community can't wait any longer.