

A preventable tragedy of society

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In today's society, we are seeing a number of crimes committed by people who are mentally ill. Sadly, many of these people are not criminals at all -- they are sick -- yet they are sent to jail, which is the last place they belong and the farthest they could possibly be from getting the psychiatric treatment they need. Jail may protect the general public from the actions of criminal others, but the victims of these illnesses are not protected from these others in jail and often do not receive the help they so desperately need. The ultimate tragedies are the cases where police have had to kill mentally ill people to protect themselves or the public.

It is common knowledge that many of our homeless suffer from mental illnesses. It is also well-known that many of the mentally ill have substance abuse problems. Many sufferers refuse the treatment they need because they don't believe they are sick, or don't want to give up alcohol or drugs.

Therefore, many families feel helpless in the daunting task of caring for them. A lot of families simply do not have knowledge of the resources that are available to help them care for their loved ones properly, such as petitioning the probate court to have their

loved one committed involuntarily, if necessary.

The situation seems to be getting worse, but maybe we are simply becoming more aware of it due to the recent flood of news stories. After Searcy's closure last year, patients from Mobile were sent to AltaPointe and other facilities, placed in group homes or sent back home to live with family members. According to Carol Mann, PR Director of AltaPointe Health Systems, not one patient from Searcy was left homeless.

In Mobile, there are only a few facilities that provide care and treatment of the mentally ill. One of these is AltaPointe. They are continually expanding to meet the needs of our mentally ill population by opening new facilities, educating caregivers about crisis prevention, housing the homeless in our community, offering rehabilitation services and even providing job readiness classes.

Another great resource for Mobile patients and family members is the Survivors of Mental Illness Club, or SOMI. This is a center specifically for the mentally ill and their families to come socialize, participate in activities, do arts and crafts, engage in support groups, hear speakers, and learn life skills. Co-coordinator Ronald Hunt says, "It is a place for them to socialize without the stigma of mental illness." He says they are a USA clinical rotation site so student nurses help with health-related issues such as checking blood pressure and teaching nutrition. Support groups are a vital aspect of treatment and SOMI provides them locally through the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

While a lot is being done for the mentally ill, even more must be done so that the growing epidemic of crimes perpetrated by the mentally ill is halted. More places like AltaPointe and SOMI are needed, as well as more group homes and community-based activities. Awareness is essential in furthering efforts for places and programs for the mentally ill and their caregivers. With the right counseling, medication and support, they can be productive members of society instead of the tragedy of society they have become.

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