

On calls when a person is suicidal, some police try a new approach

A small but growing number of agencies are telling officers that in some cases, they should leave, rather than intervene

By Caren Chesler

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Police in a small but growing number of states are trying a new tactic on calls when someone is threatening suicide. They respond, assess and sometimes, depending on the situation, they leave.

It's happening in Fresno, Calif., where last year, police were called to the home of a man who barricaded himself in his house with a gun and was threatening to kill himself and police, if they entered. It's happening in Birmingham, Ala., where in 2020, police were called to the home of a man holding a gun to his head and threatening to shoot himself or officers if they didn't back off. And it's happening in Los Angeles, Seattle and Portland, as police departments grapple with how best to assist someone who is suicidal, armed and doesn't necessarily want police to intervene.

"When we looked at the core issue of these calls — mental health — we realized that a law enforcement response may not be the appropriate one for the given situation," said Lt. William Dooley, public information officer for the Fresno Police Department. "Why should we use force, possibly injuring the person and our officers, when all we want to do is get them help?"

In departments that have adopted strategies referred to as "Tactical Disengagement" or "Tactical Retreat," officers still respond to suicide calls, sometimes with mental health professionals in tow. But they look at the totality of the circumstances before acting. For instance, has a crime taken place? Has there been a threat to hurt others? If not, and if the presence of police will only escalate the situation, departments may decide it's best to go and turn the case over to the mental health system.

The reasoning is that if police leave, they will not end up killing the suicidal person.

But there is risk as well: If police leave, mental health experts say, some suicidal people may be more likely to kill themselves.

The man who was threatening to take his own life in Fresno made it through the night, and by morning had reconsidered. But in Birmingham, the opposite occurred. Police negotiated with him for several hours. He said he "wanted to go out in a blaze," which police took as a reference to his wanting to commit "suicide by cop." Eventually, they departed. When the man's fiancée returned home the next morning, she found him dead in the bathroom, a gun

by his side.

The data is not yet there to determine which scenario is more likely. And once officers leave the scene, in some cases handing off to mental health professionals, it's no longer considered a police matter. That means there isn't always follow-up by the police department.

But Lt. Ruben Lopez, who heads the LAPD's SWAT unit, said that after he wrote an article about the city's disengagement policy this year for the publication *PoliceOne*, he received about 100 inquiries from other agencies interested in doing something similar.

"When a person is in crisis, that's not a criminal act. That's no different than someone having a medical condition in their home. But for years, we expected the police to go in and deal with it with guns drawn, and then you have the disastrous results," Lopez said.

According to *The Washington Post's* database of police shootings and associated deaths, nearly a quarter of the 6,800 fatal police shootings recorded since 2015 involved people with mental health conditions. Between 2019 and 2021, according to a *Post* investigation, there were 178 instances in which law enforcement officers shot and killed the very people they were trying to save.

Richard Frank, a senior fellow in economic studies at the Brookings Institution and director of the USC-Brookings Schaeffer Initiative on Health Policy, noted that police have long been one of the first responders to those having a mental health crisis, and they're not necessarily equipped to handle these situations.

"Police have a hard job. And they've been put in a really unenviable position," Frank said. "In fairness to them, this is not what they signed up for."

Rick Wall, a police consultant and former Los Angeles police officer, said he is working with departments in Arizona, New Mexico, California, Oregon, Washington, Nevada, Oklahoma, Kansas and Texas that are reconsidering how they respond to suicide calls. Some of the impetus, he said, is a spate of court cases that have held officers liable for engaging suicidal subjects and then firing when the subjects become aggressive.

"You've got a court saying, 'Hey, you know what? You may be better off just walking away than chasing the guy and having him die,'" Wall said.

While most states have welfare statutes enabling police to intervene if someone is a threat to themselves, suicidal subjects often don't want police intervention, or they would have called police themselves, Dooley, of the Fresno police department, said in an email.

Departments with disengagement policies emphasized that they don't have guidelines instructing officers to leave the scene of potential suicides. Instead they may make that decision in some cases, based on the assessment of the responding officers and higher-ranking officials.

"We don't have any blanket policy on it. We're still going to the same calls," said Sgt. Corey Williams of the Seattle Police Department's Crisis Response Team. "These are just added things we tell officers, in terms of best practices: that they should consider the governmental interest in the situation, and that they have the option to walk away."

While police walking away from some suicide calls may reduce shootings, removing them altogether may not be the answer either, said Paul Appelbaum, a psychiatry professor at Columbia Medical School. "You still have a suicidal person who's at risk and is receiving no assistance," he said.

Appelbaum, whose work focuses on legal issues as they intersect with psychiatric issues, said a better answer would be for police to remain in the background and send in a mental health professional to engage with the person.

Officers would still be available if needed to assist in entering a residence or otherwise help get the person to a place where they can be evaluated.

“If the person is hanging themselves, or has just slit their wrists and is behind a locked door, a social worker isn’t going to break down the door and go in to try to save them,” Appelbaum said. “Sometimes you need the authorities who can use force to enter a residence and assist someone.”

Some police officers said leaving the scene is counter to their mission. Harvey Barnwell, chief of investigators at the Union County Prosecutors’ Office in Elizabeth, N.J., thinks training — not leaving — is the way to change the culture of law enforcement in these situations.

“For us in the law enforcement profession, who took the oath and swore to serve and protect, I can’t see anyone wanting to walk away,” he said.

New Jersey recently launched a pilot program where plainclothes police in Elizabeth and Linden will respond to behavioral health crises with a certified mental health screener from a hospital. In announcing the initiative, Acting Attorney General Matthew Platkin acknowledged that a significant proportion of police uses of force in the state involve a civilian identified as suffering from mental illness or under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Barnwell said he still remembers his first attempted suicide call, nearly 30 years ago. It involved a man saying his wife was brandishing a knife and threatening to kill herself, again. Tired of the threats, the husband suggested the wife just do it already, if she was going to do it, and with that, the wife plunged the knife into her stomach. She was rushed to the hospital and recovered, Barnwell said.

But the suicide call that lingers in his memory is one he received at the end of a shift, as he was about to go on a three-day leave and just wanted to go home. A 13-year-old boy shot himself in the head while his mother was readying herself for a date with a new boyfriend. Barnwell and his partner arrived within minutes. He said his partner took the boy’s mother into the room where her son’s body lay, got down on the floor with her and cried.

“It brought me back to the realization that that was someone’s loved one, and me wanting to go home was irrelevant. And that we needed to treat that family with the compassion and grace they deserved,” he said in an interview. “I think I will always try to talk someone out of this situation, because that memory is so overwhelming.”

If you or someone you know needs help, call the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988 or visit [988lifeline.org](https://www.988lifeline.org). You can also text a crisis counselor by messaging the Crisis Text Line at 741741.