

# Anniversary Of Deborah Danner's Death Spurs Efforts To Prevent Police Killings

Mental health advocates want Mayor Bill de Blasio to reactivate a defunct task force to help.



NEW YORK CITY HALL — Little has changed in the year since an NYPD sergeant shot and killed Deborah Danner as she suffered through a mental breakdown, mental health advocates say. That's why they called Wednesday for Mayor Bill de Blasio to reactivate a city task force to better train police to deal with people struggling with mental illness and develop ways to help them without cops getting involved.

“Having a mental illness in our society should never be a crime,” city Councilwoman Vanessa Gibson (D-Bronx) said at a City Hall news conference, flanked by about two dozen other advocates and public officials.

NYPD Sgt. Hugh Barry [shot and killed Danner](#), 66, on Oct. 18, 2016, after responding to a call reporting erratic behavior at her Bronx apartment. Danner first raised a pair of scissors and then a baseball bat at Barry, who struck her with two shots in the chest. He was [charged with murder](#) in May, The New York Times reported.

The NYPD has given than 6,300 officers in crisis intervention training since June 2015, teaching them how to defuse encounters with emotionally disturbed people like the one that ended in Danner's death, the department said. Some 90 officers each week are currently getting the training, the NYPD said.

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But seven people have still died at the hands of police since that training started, including one last month, said Carla Rabinowitz of Community Access, a mental-health advocacy group.

De Blasio and Police Commissioner James O'Neill [lamented Danner's death as preventable](#), with O'Neill saying it represented a failure of police training. Danner had been through training on handling emotionally disturbed people.

The mayor's [Task Force on Behavioral Health and the Criminal Justice System](#) in 2014 created a [\\$130 million plan](#) to cut unnecessary arrests of people struggling with mental health

issues. That panel should be reconvened to determine ways to help people struggling with mental illness without getting police involved, advocates said Wednesday.

For instance, they said, more social workers could accompany cops when they respond to mental health crises. Only five social workers go with cops on certain calls, but they can't be present when there's a threat of violence, Rabinowitz said.

The task force could also look into creating more diversion centers to keep troubled people out of jails and hospitals, from which they are released without getting all the help they need, Rabinowitz said.

“Give us the ability to stop senseless deaths,” said Lorenzo Diggs, a mental health specialist with the Howie the Harp Advocacy Center in Harlem.

While police aren't the whole solution, the NYPD should have at least 15,000 cops, or about 40 percent of the force, trained in crisis intervention, Rabinowitz said. Some said the entire force should get the training, including Sanford Rubenstein, a high-profile lawyer representing the families of four mentally ill people killed by police.

The NYPD does a good job with the roughly 150,000 calls about emotionally disturbed people it gets each year, Gibson said. But those that end badly have left some families afraid to call 911.

“The person that they're calling help for is the one that's ending up dead, and it needs to stop,” said Angela Owens, whose father, James Owens, was [killed by a cop](#) during a medical crisis on Jan. 3.

De Blasio's office did not respond to Patch's email seeking comment on the advocates' call to revive his task force.

(Lead image: Angela Owens, the daughter of James Owens, a man who was killed by an NYPD officer during a medical crisis, speaks at a news conference at City Hall on Wednesday. Photo by Noah Manskar)