

New York City Launches Task Force on Mentally Ill After Shootings

Two weeks after New York Police Department officers fatally shot a mentally disturbed man they thought was armed with a gun, Mayor Bill de Blasio launched a task force aimed at improving city responses to emergencies involving the mentally ill.

The task force, made up of city officials, as well as New Yorkers living with mental illness, will over the course of 180 days focus on ways to prevent crises with the mentally ill and increase collaboration between the NYPD and the city's health agencies, municipal officials said on Thursday.

After six months, the city will announce a strategy based on the task force's findings.

"A mental illness shouldn't be a death sentence," Donovan Richards, chairman of the city council public-safety committee, said in a statement. "Which is why it is imperative that we continue the conversation around better practices and keep pushing to find a smarter and safer approach."

Calls for the task force were renewed when earlier this month police officers shot and killed Saheed Vassell, a 34-year-old man suffering from bipolar disorder. Police received three 911 calls that he was threatening passersby with a gun in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn.

Mr. Vassell took a "shooting stance" and pointed an object at several officers, prompting them to fire a combined 10 shots, according to the NYPD.

Officers later discovered he was holding a metal pipe. Eric Schneiderman, the state attorney general, is investigating the shooting.

Earlier this year, a Bronx judge acquitted an NYPD sergeant of murder for fatally shooting Deborah Danner, a 66-year-old paranoid schizophrenic, who allegedly swung a bat at his head in her apartment.

The NYPD responded to more than 160,000 emergency calls involving the mentally-ill last year, according to city officials.

Steve Coe, the CEO of Community Access, an organization that advocates for the mentally ill and works with the NYPD training officers on how to treat that community, said he hopes the task force focuses on creating a system that also would dispatch social workers to emergencies involving the mentally-ill.

He said the task force should look at expanding the number of the city's coresponse teams, which pair police officers with clinicians.

While other cities send the teams directly to emergencies, New York City has the teams work with the mentally-ill before they are in a crises.

"Cities across the country have found these techniques to dramatically reduce harm to people in crisis, while reducing costs associated with incarceration and hospitalizations," Mr. Coe said.

A memorial was set up for Saheed Vassell, who was shot and killed by NYPD officers earlier this month in Brooklyn.

The formation of the task force comes on the same day as the wake for Mr. Vassell, according to Tina Luongo, attorney in charge of criminal defense at the Legal Aid society, which has been working with the Vassell family. Ms. Luongo called the task force “the limpest of all government responses to this crisis.”

“Without the names of the police officers who murdered [Mr. Vassell], without releasing the unedited video, without real accountability and transparency of what happened that day, there is no justice,” Ms. Luongo said in a statement.

The NYPD released transcripts of the three 911 calls, surveillance footage of police arriving to the scene and shooting Mr. Vassell, as well as Mr. Vassell’s movements before the shooting.

Mr. de Blasio previously said he didn’t believe disclosing the officers’ names was right, citing Mr. Schneiderman’s investigation and an internal NYPD probe into the shooting.

In response to Ms. Luongo, Olivia Lapeyrolerie, a spokeswoman for Mr. de Blasio, said the task force would bring together some of the “brightest minds” in the city to work on the complex matter. “This problem isn’t unique to NYC, but no city of our size has leveraged all levels of [government] to address this issue in this way,” she said.