

MENTAL HEALTH
ASSOCIATION of
PORTLAND

To Portland City Council Members,

Comments in relation to consent item #492 from the Portland City Council agenda of May 9, 2012.

Portlanders share a problem – those of us who suffer from mental illness routinely contemplate and commit suicide. It is not a problem limited to our city, but its effects can be mitigated here.

The Mental Health Association of Portland offers thanks to David Hidalgo and the staff of the Multnomah County Crisis Center, to Lisa Turley and the staff of the Bureau of Emergency Communications, and to the Portland City Council and their staff - especially Commissioner Amanda Fritz, for thinking through a difficult problem and attempting the beginning of a solution.

Mental illness and suicide affect Portland's entire community – friends, families, neighbors – people we care about.

To contemplate suicide is not unusual, nor does it indicate the need for police action. It is not, in itself, a threat to anyone. It is not illegal. It is a normal symptom of a set of common illnesses.

We routinely tell those in our community who are contemplating suicide, especially children and teenagers, to talk about those thoughts with someone they trust. The flaw in this approach is that the suicidal are reluctant to trust others.

People with mental illness call 9-1-1 because they are desperate, but operators do not have the time to listen until the caller's suicidal feeling passes. They are there to dispatch police, fire, and medical personnel as needed.

A calm and patient approach is, however, integral to the Multnomah County Crisis Hotline. It makes sense to simply transfer calls by the suicidal from the BOEC to the crisis hotline.

There must be discretion about transferring these calls. The confidentiality of the caller is vital to maintaining trust, and 9-1-1 and crisis workers must be able to determine who is at risk and who poses a risk to others.

The Mental Health Association of Portland would like to re-emphasize that suicide is not illegal. Attempting suicide is not illegal. Talking about suicide is not illegal. Mental illness and addiction are not illegal. When 9-1-1 operators relay calls to the police from persons who are having a mental health emergency, we have effectively criminalized mental illness.

With today's vote, Portland's City Council shows awareness of this inadvertent criminalization of mental illness and an intention to change it. We must ask, however, that you routinely review the capacity of the county crisis hotline to respond knowledgeably and resourcefully to Portland's mental health emergency calls. The county's provision of mental health services is, at best, spotty, and the inconsistent ability to recruit and retain competent mental health services staff is well documented.

Thank you again for your attention to this complicated problem.

James Mazzocco – Advisory Council

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Moore-Love, Karla

From: pdx97217@gmail.com on behalf of Mental Health Association
[info@mentalhealthportland.org]
Sent: Tuesday, May 08, 2012 9:17 AM
To: Moore-Love, Karla
Subject: Item 492 on 5 9 2012 consent agenda
Attachments: MHAP Council comment 05082012.pdf



MHAP Council
comment 05082012

Hi Karla.

Our organization would like to make a public comment on item 492 on the Council agenda. Would you be willing to move it from the Consent Agenda?

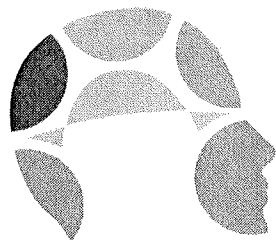
See the attached document for public testimony. Our Advisory Board member James Mazzocco will be in attendance on Wednesday to read from this letter.

Thanks!

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Jason Renaud
Mental Health Association of Portland
503-367-6128
PO Box 3641 Portland, Oregon 97208

May 8, 2012



**MENTAL HEALTH
ASSOCIATION of
PORTLAND**

To Portland City Council Members,

Comments in relation to consent item #492 from the Portland City Council agenda of May 8, 2012.

Our organization and its supporters offer congratulations and thanks to the members of Portland City Council and Council staff, David Hidalgo and the staff of the Multnomah County Crisis Center, Lisa Turley and staff of the Bureau of Emergency Communications, and especially to Commissioner Amanda Fritz for thinking through a difficult problem and finding the beginning of a solution.

The problem is many persons with mental illness routinely contemplate suicide.

People in our community – these are our friends, our family members, our neighbors, our co-workers, people we care about and live with. This contemplation is not unusual or indicative of necessary action. It is not contagious. It is not necessarily a threat to anyone. It is not illegal, immoral, dangerous or wrong. Actually it's a fairly normal symptom of a set of fairly common illnesses.

And we have routinely told persons in our community who are contemplating suicide – especially children and teenagers – to talk about it with someone they trust. Talk about the feeling – quickly and explicitly. That talking reorients a series of crazy thoughts and often, just by talking, the feeling passes.

But there's a problem. In addition to despair, persons who are suicidal are reluctant to trust others. The workaround is for persons who are routinely contacted by persons who are suicidal to NOT PANIC.

People with mental illness call 911 because they have been told the operators will be calm, authoritative, resourceful and NOT PANIC. What the operators at the Bureau of Emergency Communications is abundant time to listen until the feeling passes and the patience to not react. These skills are advertised by the Multnomah County Crisis hotline. So it makes sense to simply transfer calls of persons who are suicidal from the BOEC to the County crisis line.

We accept there must be discretion about transferring these calls – both in protecting the confidentiality of the callers and thereby maintaining trust, and being able to filter who is at risk – or poses risk to others – and those who do not.

We want to emphasize one point and ask for some continuing oversight on your part.

Attempting suicide is not illegal. Suicide is not illegal. Talking about suicide is not illegal. Mental illness and addiction are not illegal. Having symptoms of mental illness and addiction are not illegal. When 911 operators relay calls from persons who are having a mental health emergency to the police you have criminalized mental illness. With today's vote the Council shows it is aware of this inadvertent criminalization of mental illness and show an intention to change things. That's good.

But we ask for you to routinely review the capacity of the County's Crisis hotline to respond knowledgeably and resourcefully to mental health emergency calls. The County's provision of mental health services is, at best, spotty, and their ability to recruit and retain competent mental health services staff is well documented.

Thanks again for your attention to this complicated problem.

Jason Renaud - Secretary
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