

Helping the Police to Help You

The following information is based on a presentation made by Lt. Cara Westin of the Sacramento Police Department at a NAMI Sacramento General Meeting in 2008.

Lt. Westin talked about the fact that the police are often put in the very difficult situation of being first responders when someone is in crisis and the mental health system is inaccessible or fails to provide adequate services. While the vast majority of these calls result in a positive outcome for the families and their ill loved ones, sometimes the outcome is less than positive – even tragic. All of us have heard stories of mentally ill individuals who have been taken to jail, instead of to the hospital, or the worse case when someone has been killed by the police.

The following guidelines are offered to assist families dealing with a crisis situation that may involve contacting the police or sheriff to intervene. Understanding what to expect when contacting the police enhances the likelihood of a positive outcome.

1. **Be knowledgeable** about the legal constraints and procedures involved in an involuntary commitment under California Welfare and Institutions Code Section 5150. There are very specific criteria when someone can be admitted to a psychiatric hospital against his/her will. While the police may have some flexibility in making this judgment and taking the person to a hospital, ultimately it is up to a medical professional to make the final assessment.
2. **Be prepared** to accept the fact that you can't control the outcome. Understand that if an individual appears lucid and does not show any signs of hurting himself (or herself) or others, the police will not have any grounds to take him/her into custody. Also, if it is clear that a violent crime has been committed (including domestic abuse), then the police may not have any choice but to take the person to jail, regardless of their mental state.
3. **Be clear** about your expectations. If you are requesting that your loved one be taken to the hospital on a Section 5150 hold then you need to tell the police why you feel that he or she is a threat to themselves or others. If there is evidence to support your allegation (such as medication, threatening notes, etc.) it needs to be made available to the police.
4. **Be honest** with the dispatcher when you call 911 and with the officers when they arrive on the scene. If there are weapons, hostages, drugs, or anything else in the residence then the police need to know that. The only way that they can keep themselves safe, you safe, and your loved one safe, is if they have a very clear understanding of the situation and potential risks involved.
5. **Be cooperative** because the more that you can do to help the police, the more they will be able to do to help your loved one. If the police encounter

hostility from family members or a situation where there is no agreement on the desired outcome, it is more difficult for them to sort out what needs to be done to resolve the situation.

6. **Be realistic** when you call the police and realize that a 5150 commitment is not a panacea. In all likelihood your loved one is not going to be in the hospital more than a few days until the immediate crisis has passed. It is not unusual for someone to cycle through the mental health system many times before he or she is hospitalized for an extended period of time.