

Some Steps to Prevent Physical Aggression and Violent Behavior

- *Adopt a calming attitude; be empathetic and nonthreatening. Use slow speech with simple statements. Be caring but confident. Listen more than you talk and avoid discussing emotionally charged issues.*
- *Don't pretend everything is fine. Have a plan to keep you and your family safe. Get professional help if there is any threat of violence or the family is afraid.*
- *Learn the factors or triggers which predict physical aggression, such as the physical signs, increased paranoia, arguments, confrontational attitude, disorientation, confusion or withdrawal into silence.*
- *Assist your relative to do things that uniquely calms him/her and helps to control aggressive behavior. Make it easy to cooperate and still save face.*
- *Avoid restricting your own activities or backing down from established rules or boundaries. Don't let your loved one use threats of violence (or suicide) to manipulate you.*
- *When someone is suicidal, Listen; Accept the person's feelings; Take the person seriously; Show you care by listening and accepting; Accept the person's life perspective; Be understanding.*



NAMI Sacramento is dedicated to helping people with mental illness, their families, and the broader community through a comprehensive set of programs and activities, including support, education, and advocacy. NAMI Sacramento also works closely with local law enforcement to educate officers about constructive methods for dealing with individuals who have mental illness and strategies for diffusing crisis situations.

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Dealing with A Mental Health Crisis: Helping the Police to Help You



These guidelines are offered to assist families dealing with a mental health crisis situation that may involve contacting the local police or county sheriff to intervene. Understanding what to expect when contacting law enforcement enhances the likelihood of a positive outcome. The guidelines are based on the principles taught to peace officers and first responders as part of **Sacramento County's Crisis Intervention Training for Law Enforcement.**

Crisis Intervention for Individuals and Families Experiencing a Mental Health Crisis

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. Police officers are not trained psychologists or social workers. They are often constrained by the law and circumstances in dealing with someone experiencing a serious psychotic episode. While the vast majority of crisis calls result in a positive outcome for the families and their ill loved ones, sometimes the outcome is less than positive – even tragic. We have all heard stories of mentally ill individuals who have been taken to jail, instead of to the hospital, or even killed by the police.

Please consider the following guidelines in order to avoid a crisis if possible and to develop a viable action plan when a crisis arises.

Be realistic about the legal constraints involved in an involuntary commitment under California *Welfare and Institutions Code Section 5150*. There are very specific criteria that must be met before 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 a medical professional must make the final assessment. Understand that if an individual appears lucid and does not show any signs of hurting him/herself or others, the police may not have any grounds to take the individual 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 your loved one to jail, regardless of their mental state.

Be knowledgeable about the extent of the family's role in crisis intervention and what you can do to make the outcome as positive as possible. *Welfare and Institutions Code 5150.05* was specifically designed to give families a voice in dealing with law enforcement officers. Specifically the law requires that officers must consider "available relevant information about the historical course of the person's mental disorder."

However, the law leaves it to the police to determine if the information provided "has a reasonable bearing on the determination as to whether a person is a danger to others, or to himself or herself, or is gravely disabled as a result of the mental disorder." In order for the officer to consider family input, the officer must be given concise and factual information about the history of a person's illness including past hospitalizations, threats of violence, self-harming behavior etc.

Be prepared and understand that the police do not have a lot of time to consider additional input when making their decision. 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. If you want your input to be valued you must have documentation and evidence that your loved one is a danger to him/herself or others, or is gravely disabled. Evidence can include journals, notes, emails, photos, and audio/video recordings. Be as factual and objective as you can. You may be asked by the officer to sign a statement attesting to the truthfulness of your statements.

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, you, and your loved one safe, is if they have a very clear understanding of the situation and potential risks involved. You also should not exaggerate the severity of the current crisis, fabricate evidence or make false statements about past incidents. Your reliability as a victim and witness is critical. If you lie to the police it will damage your credibility in any future dealings that you may have with law enforcement. It will also severely damage the trust relationship that you have with your mentally ill loved one.

Be cooperative because the more that you can do to help the police, the more they will be able 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. Safety is the primary concern in any crisis situation. You do not want the police to perceive you as part of the problem

by engaging in threatening or escalating behavior like yelling, cursing, brandishing weapons, etc. Stay as calm as possible, be respectful of the officers, and do what you are asked to do to stay safe and keep your loved one safe.

Consider other options, because even if your loved one is taken to the hospital, in all likelihood he or she 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. Seek out other community resources that can help you to develop coping skills and strategies for dealing with future crisis situations. Some of these resources include:

- The **Community Support Team (CST)**. A Sacramento County Mental Health Program that brings licensed clinicians and trained peer support specialists together. The goal of CST intervention is to work proactively with families to avoid crisis, identify community resources, assist with problem-solving in order to reduce the risk of suicide or need for involuntary commitment. The CST can be contacted Monday – Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. at (916) 874-6015. There is no charge for this service.
- The **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)**. An organization dedicated to helping people with mental illness and their families. NAMI Sacramento offers support groups, education and training. NAMI Programs are offered at no cost. For more information go to www.namiasacramento.org or call (916) 364-1642.
- **Abiding Hope Respite House**. A temporary environment for peer-directed recovery services for adults with psychiatric disabilities who need relief from the stresses of life. Referrals may come from law enforcement, outpatient case managers and shelters. For more information call (916) 287-4860.
- Sacramento County also has a **2-1-1 Resource & Referral Telephone Line** that is staffed 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. The operator is trained to assist residents to locate all kinds of community services.