

Kelly Thomas Tragedy in Fullerton, California

Statement by National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)



SACRAMENTO, Calif., Aug. 5, 2011 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) today released a joint statement on behalf of NAMI Orange County, NAMI California and the national organization. The statement calls on the City of Fullerton and its Police Department to undertake a comprehensive review of the training of police, looking to the most effective models, to govern interaction with individuals exhibiting symptoms of serious mental illness. The review should include direct participation by individuals and families who live with mental illness and medical experts and should extend to the city's overall continuum of mental health care.

The president of NAMI Orange County is Steve Pitman and NAMI California is Dorothy Hendrickson. The executive director of the national organization is Michael J. Fitzpatrick.

The full text of the statement follows:

NAMI's heart goes out to Mr. Ron Thomas and his family in the tragic death of his son, Kelly Thomas. Our members throughout the nation know firsthand the challenges faced by both individuals and families affected by serious mental illness. We extend our sympathy and offer our support to the family.

All persons whose lives have been affected by mental illness know that such a tragedy could happen to any one of us or our loved ones. Mental illness and homelessness can strike anyone at any time. What happened in Fullerton could happen to any American in any community around our country.

No one really knows at this time—other than the police officers themselves—what went on during the horrible beating and use of tasers on Kelly Thomas. They may not have fully realized that he was living with a serious mental illness. Too often, however, language and stereotypes in our culture serve to dehumanize people. Police frequently come into contact with persons living with the symptoms of serious mental illness. It is important that law enforcement officers understand how to interact with a person with mental illness when they may be exhibiting symptoms. Many communities around the country have implemented specific programs that teach first responders effective techniques to de-escalate encounters in the field with people in psychiatric distress. Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) programs have reduced incidents of violence between persons with serious mental illness and local law enforcement officers.

When violence occurs, something has gone terribly wrong. It is important to review all the facts in any tragedy and try to learn from mistakes so that such a tragedy might not ever happen again. NAMI encourages the City of Fullerton and its Police Department to undertake a comprehensive review of the training of its officers, looking to the most effective models, to govern interaction with individuals exhibiting symptoms of serious mental illness. The review should include direct participation by individuals and families who live with mental illness and medical experts.

CIT programs involve more than just training. They are community partnerships that not only reduce violence, but get people the help they need. Pre-booking and post-booking diversion programs and mental health courts help direct people into a comprehensive continuum of care involving many different elements. That continuum should also be the City of Fullerton's review.

NAMI Orange County, NAMI California and NAMI's national organization stand ready to assist the City of Fullerton in any way to achieve community best practices.

NAMI is the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization engaged in support, education, and advocacy dedicated to the mission of building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by serious mental illness. We stand for lives of dignity and respect for all persons.

SOURCE National Alliance on Mental Illness