

By Greg B. Smith

THE CITY

MAYOR'S MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS RESPONSE OFFERS WEAK DOSE OF CARE, ADVOCATES WARN



Eric Vassell stands at the intersection of Montgomery Street and Utica Avenue in Crown Heights, where his 34-year-old mentally ill son, Saheed Vassell, was fatally shot by NYPD officers in April 2018. Photo: Ben Fractenberg/THE CITY

It's been 18 months since Eric Vassell lost his son Saheed to the police shooting that spurred Mayor Bill de Blasio's vow to overhaul how the NYPD deals with people experiencing mental health crises.

On Monday, as Blasio released the long-awaited reforms, the elder Vassell struggled through his ongoing grief to find some solace.

"It's sad that my son had to lose his life for them to take these steps," Eric Vassell told THE CITY.

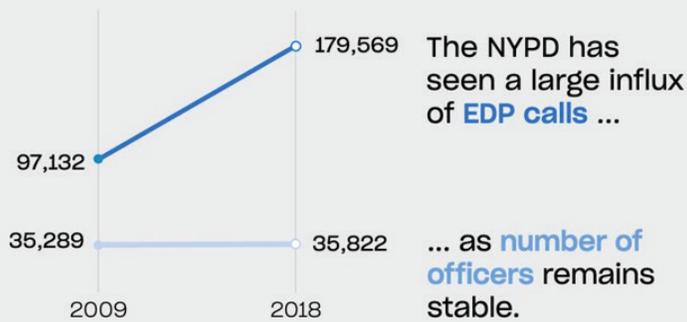
Advocates for people with mental illness who had offered advice to the mayor on how to change the city's emergency response system weren't as measured in their words.

They almost universally panned de Blasio's revamp as overdue and underdone — not going nearly far enough to minimize the NYPD's involvement in the kind of 911 call responses that have ended with the deaths of 15 people going through psychiatric crises since 2015.

"It is not what we were expecting," said Ruth Lowenkron, director of the New York Lawyers for the Public Interest's disability justice program. "I'm in a state of shock if this is all the mayor is coming out with."

As THE CITY reported Monday, the NYPD will for the first time, in a two-precinct test, send mental health clinicians out with cops to respond to 911

Emotional distress calls rise sharply



The NYPD has seen a large influx of **EDP calls** ...

... as **number of officers** remains stable.

Source: NYPD; New York City Council Budget

KAZI AWAL / THE CITY

calls for people with mental health issues. The Health Department will expand medical team follow-ups with the subjects of such calls.

Meanwhile, the NYPD will stop using the phrase “EDP” — for “emotionally disturbed person” — and instead dub responses “mental health calls.” The Police Department also will establish a mental health unit.

TRAGIC CIRCUMSTANCES

De Blasio announced the changes in a news release Monday with his wife, Chirlane McCray, who spearheaded the city’s ThriveNYC mental health effort. The mayor initially had promised to come up with a plan within six months of the death of Saheed Vassell on April 4, 2018.

Cops responded to 911 calls that day after the 34-year-old bipolar man was seen walking down a Brooklyn street pointing an object at passersby. Callers said they weren’t sure whether Vassell was wielding a gun. Yet the 911 dispatcher told officers they were headed to a “firearms job.”

The object Vassell was pointing turned out to be a piece of pipe.

The cops who responded to the scene in Crown Heights were unaware of Vassell’s mental health history and weren’t trained to handle mental health calls.

Eric Vassell said he liked the idea of cops pairing with mental health professionals.

“Sending people, not just police officers, that would be great,” he said. “Police officers, the intention is to

stop you. I don’t want to say that their intention is to kill you.

“But they are not coming with a medical mindset,” he added. “They are coming with a criminal mindset. If someone can come with a medical mindset, then it would be better. Their approach would be in a more professional way.”

OVER-USE OF COPS SEEN

Still, some advocates for people with mental illness said sending co-response teams to 911 calls continues what they deem the over-use of police in often volatile situations. They would like to see cops rarely, if ever, involved.



Deborah Danner, who suffered from mental illness, was fatally shot by an NYPD officer during a confrontation in her apartment in 2016.

Photo: DNAinfo

“The solutions outlined in the final recommendations do not go far enough to reform the crisis response system in New York,” said Cal Hedigan, CEO of Community Access, an advocacy group pressing for reforms to the mental health system. “Co-response teams ... rely heavily on law enforcement and reinforce the idea that the solution to a mental health crisis arrives in a police car.”

Lowenkron worried about how the teams would interact on the street: “Who’s going to be stepping

forward and who's going to be stepping back? Is that (mental health clinician) going to be allowed to go ahead or is the police officer going to be calling the shots?"

Public Advocate Jumaane Williams, who released a list of proposed reforms last month, also took issue with the expansion of co-response teams.

"We need a non-police first response to mental health crises, and this plan does not even put us on a path toward that goal," he said.

The mayor's plan also did not address Williams' proposal to create an alternative dispatch system that exclusively handles mental health calls. Still, Susan Herman, director of ThriveNYC, told THE CITY Williams' idea is "worth considering."

Lowenkron and others did applaud de Blasio's call for expanding the use of medical clinician teams to follow up with people in mental distress to make sure they're taking their medication and getting the help they need.

No More 'Normal' Days

Saheed Vassell had stopped taking his medications, said his father, adding it was difficult for him and his wife, Lorna, to get their son to follow his prescribed regimen.

Eric Vassell praised the increased effort to make sure trained professionals follow up to make sure people are getting the treatment they need.

"That would be great because many of these people think that they are okay when they are not," he said. "My son is an example of that situation."

The Vassell family still lives in the same apartment, a couple blocks from the street corner where Saheed was shot. Eric Vassell says his wife cries every day.

"We are just here going on," he said. "It has never been a day when it's a normal day before our son was killed. Our life will never go back to where it was."