

For Immediate Release

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One Year After the Death of Saheed Vassell, Communities for Crisis Intervention Teams in NYC Holds Rally, Demand Reforms

- Advocacy group demands improvements to NYC responses to individuals experiencing mental health crises

(New York, NY, 4/4/19) – One year after the death of Saheed Vassell at the hands of police, families, advocates, and elected officials marked the occasion with a rally at City Hall, calling on the NYPD and de Blasio Administration to implement key policies and provisions to decrease the likelihood of deaths and injuries in encounters between police officers and people experiencing emotional crises.

Speakers included Public Advocate Jumaane Williams; Steve Coe, CEO, and Carla Rabinowitz, Advocacy Coordinator, Community Access; Eric Vassell (father of Saheed Vassell), Ralph Feliciello (a social worker with experience calling NYC Well to solicit non-police alternative), and Daniel McGuiness, the attorney representing the family of Miguel Richards, who was killed in 2017.

Mr. Vassell was one of at least 13 deaths and at least two people seriously injured since CIT training began in June 2015.

“When someone calls for assistance for their loved one and they are emotionally disturbed or have a mental illness, they are asking for medical treatment for their loved one. Police and 911, unfortunately, are trained to deal with criminal issues and criminal crises. The reason we are continuing to have this problem is that we are giving a criminal response to a medical problem. That is fundamentally what we need to change in this system. It is no longer enough for this mayor and this administration to say ‘we are planning to do something,’ we need to them to do something right now,” said **Public Advocate Jumaane Williams**. “We want to see some movement on getting medical people involved when these calls happen. We want to see retraining for 911 operators so they can better understand how to deal with the situation, or best of all, having a different number for people to call when they have a medical emergency.”

“We formed a coalition in 2012 to bring training to the NYPD in their interactions with people who have mental health concerns. Since that time, several thousand officers have been trained, but violence is still being committed. We would like to move beyond the CIT training and implement the recommendations from the Mayor’s Task Force on Crisis Prevention and Response. We also want an inclusive and transparent process to pilot, implement, and evaluate these recommendations. We’ve seen some progress, we want to see much more,” said **Steve Coe, CEO, Community Access**.

“People in the mental health community should not live in fear of calling for help because we may be shot. The City needs to stop expecting the police to respond to mental health crises. The City needs to create more pre-crisis centers, and include the mental health community in all decision making at all levels. We no longer want to only be able to call 911 to get help for a mental health crisis. The City needs to rethink how crisis calls are addressed or more mental health recipients will be shot and killed by officers who do not want, nor are they often not trained to, respond to these mental health calls,” said **Carla Rabinowitz, Advocacy Coordinator, Community Access.**

Eric Vassell, the father of Saheed Vassell, said: “I am saying today, ‘Mayor de Blasio, my son was killed one year ago. What changes have you made to the 911 response system? How have Saheed’s killers been held accountable for their actions?’ The Mayor has said that my son’s death was a tragedy. Over the past year I have not seen him take any responsibility or make any policy changes to prevent another family from the nightmare from losing a loved one to police violence.”

Ralph Feliciello, a social worker who called for help when his son experienced a mental health crisis, said: “What would you do if, like me, a member of your family who had a serious psychiatric illness was in an episode, an emergency? A therapist says you must call and have the person evaluated. What if the person is threatening to harm himself or someone else. What would you do? I didn’t want to call 911. I knew about New York Well. I imagined a unit of specially trained mental health professionals would be there to deescalate and assess the situation. When I called New York Well, I was told it would take 48 hours. I said, ‘My child can’t wait 48 hours.’ So I called 911. The result was a small army of police, who were doing their job – which is not really their job – which is treating someone experiencing a severe mental health episode.”

When asked by organizers how Mr. Feliciello felt when police responded, he said, “scared and confused.”

He went on, “I hope you will do what you can to see that what happened to Mr. Vassell’s family and to my family, never happens to another family.”

Daniel McGuinness, an attorney representing the family of Miguel Richards, said: “Miguel Richards was shot to death and killed standing in his own bedroom, at 31 years old. It is unacceptable. The time has passed for these changes. They need to be made now. The City of New York demands it. The parents, friends the loved ones of all these people demand it. The father of Miguel Richards demands it.”

Sanford Rubenstein, an attorney for the family of Michael Cordero who suffers from a bipolar disorder and schizophrenia said in a statement, “There are serious issues regarding the shooting of Michael Cordero by an NYPD officer in the hallway of the building in which he lives in Harlem. They include how the NYPD interacts with those suffering from mental illness and the failure of officers to follow protocol and the failure to train all officers in how to interact with the mentally ill.”

Based on the feedback of community members, many of whom have a direct experience with mental health services, including the use of 911 in emergency situations, the Coalition wants to see fewer interactions between people in an emotional crisis and police officers, who, at best, receive only 40 hours of training in understanding behavioral issues.

Reforming the crisis response system requires several steps:

- Reduce the number of mental health-related 911 calls by creating alternative avenues for assistance during crisis situations.
- Better document and track the mental health-related 911 calls that do come in to analyze why those calls were made and how they could have been prevented.
- Replace officer-only responses with co-response teams or teams that are composed of highly trained crisis counselors.
- Develop more “pre-crisis” supports in communities that are the source of the highest number of calls.
- Engage in a community-wide planning effort that includes people who have direct experience with crisis situations and who can best define what helps and what doesn’t.

For more details, read our Executive Summary, [Rethinking the Police Response to Psychiatric Crises](#).

About CCITNYC:

Communities for Crisis Intervention Team Training in New York City was formed in 2012 to respond to the numerous deaths and injuries of individuals experiencing mental health crises that had occurred at the hands of the police. Our members include over 85 nonprofit providers, advocates, family members, and concerned citizens, as well as 400 people who have had personal experience with the public mental health system and crisis services – the real experts.

www.ccitnyc.org

About Community Access:

Community Access’ mission is to expand opportunities for people living with mental health concerns to recover from trauma and discrimination through affordable housing, training, advocacy, and healing-focused services. We are built upon the simple truth that people are experts in their own lives.

www.communityaccess.org

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