

Mentally Ill Lost in Justice System
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Lubbock Avalanche-Journal
September 26, 2010

The Inmate in this Story Will be Referred to Only as Robert.

Robert presses his face against the feces-smear window in his jail cell as he alternates between song and inscrutable vocalization.

Bits of fecal matter cling to his dirty hair, yet he asks a detention officer for a toothbrush and toothpaste.

He likes to brush his teeth.

What he doesn't like is interaction with people, and the excrement he smears all over himself serves as his shield from the rest of the world.

Robert is severely mentally ill and his untreated schizophrenia and personality disorder are compounded by his Tourette syndrome.

He's homeless and no one knows where the 50-year-old came from.

He's been in jail nearly six months for breaking into cars in which to sleep and keep warm from the cold nights of early spring.

When Lubbock police brought him in, he had stuffed feces into his pockets and rolled it up in his pant legs. The turban he had fashioned out of a white towel was brown with feces.

Days upon days of the putrid clothing rubbing his skin had covered his body in open sores. Maggots crawled in the sores.

Each day, the Lubbock County Detention Center's Detention Response Team has to remove him from his cell to clean his soiled, single-bed room.

Detention officers have had to literally hold him under the shower to get him clean enough to take to a court appearance.

Because of his mental condition, he will remain in the isolation cell until he is released from jail. However, without mental health treatment and left alone on the street, he'll likely end up right back in his cell.

"While I agree the street is not the best place for him, he doesn't need to be in a jail cell either," said Capt. Malcolm Chambliss of the Lubbock County Sheriff's Office. "This is a huge problem."

Chambliss patiently asks Robert if he can look inside his cell, but Robert says he is cleaning it and asks Chambliss to wait a few minutes.

Robert says he is cleaning but actually he is smearing feces with a dirty rag, Chambliss says.

The smell is more than noticeable through the thick steel door and glass window.

Although his case is one of the most grotesque, Robert was not the only severely mentally ill inmate in his pod at the new detention facility.

Inmates like Robert are housed in the Special Housing Unit — the same unit as the assaultive and aggressive defendants — because they must be handled by the response team, which Chambliss commands.

In addition to being a trained tactical unit, Chambliss' team is also trained in dealing with the mentally ill inmates they work with on a daily basis, he said.

Communication is paramount and the only way to gain compliance from the severely ill, Chambliss said.

“We talk as much as we can,” he said. “They start identifying the people they think they can trust.”

Patience and tone of voice are invaluable when dealing with these inmates.

Sgt. Shawn Benitez has built a good rapport with Robert. Robert sings her some Tina Turner between bouts of unintelligible noises caused by his Tourette syndrome.

Benitez said the best way to communicate with him is to treat him like a child.

“You’ve got to get him involved,” Benitez said.

But a good rapport still doesn't solve all of the problems detention officers face dealing with an inmate like Robert.

Even taking him to recreation can easily become a security situation, Chambliss said.

Robert recently threw a cup of urine at a detention officer who opened the food port on Robert's cell door.

That officer had to be tested for diseases because no one could be sure what he might have been exposed to.

“It's a constant battle keeping him clean for his health — for our health,” Chambliss said. “When they're covered in biological waste, it's a danger to my guys.”

Besides his schizophrenia and Tourette syndrome, Robert has been diagnosed with a non-specified personality disorder.

The presence of more than one mental disorder can exacerbate a patient's symptoms, said Robert Morgan, Ph.D., a forensic psychologist and associate professor of psychology at Texas Tech.

While many people suffering from mental illness function well in jail — the structure of institutionalization even benefits some patients — placing a schizophrenic in isolation can either bring about the onset of psychosis or intensify existing psychosis, Morgan said.

The lack of stimulation and social interaction, which are oft-used forms of psychotherapy, can cause a patient to focus on his or her hallucinations even more.

“Basically what you're doing there is you're not providing an opportunity for the person to get better,” Morgan said.

Making the situation worse is the fact that Robert refuses to take anti-psychotic medication.

Supplemental treatments are often needed, but psychotropic medication can be highly effective in dispelling a patient's psychosis, Morgan said.

“They're not going to get better without medication,” Morgan said. “But just because you give them medication, that might not be enough to get them functioning at their highest level or their peak level.”

A patient can be forced to take medication through a court order if the patient is a danger to himself or others, Morgan said.

Without medication, Robert will not be able to proceed through the legal system, and the clock is running out.

The maximum term of incarceration for the crime Robert is in jail for is six months. In October he will eclipse that and can no longer be under the watchful eyes of officers like Chambliss and Benitez.

“We have to let them out,” said Judge Drue Farmer, who presides over a specialty mental health court handling a majority of the cases involving defendants with special needs.

She said charges will most likely be dismissed against defendants whose jail time has exceeded the maximum punishment and the inmate will be released.

Farmer said the goal is to work with local agencies — like Lubbock Regional Mental Health Mental Retardation and the Lubbock Special Needs Defender's Office — to assist defendants who have to be released from jail.

“What we're trying to do is get them these services so that they don't re-offend,” Farmer said.

Meanwhile, Benitez says, just like every other day, the response team will remove Robert from his cell, clearing the way for working inmates who will use brand new mop heads and cleaning supplies to clean away the excrement with which Robert spent the last 24 hours bedaubing his cell.