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POLICE AND HEALTH STAFF JOIN FORCES FOR MENTAL HEALTH

A new mental health training program for local police officers is helping drive a better understanding of consumers who need treatment for mental health issues.

The Police Orientation Program is conducted by North Shore Ryde Mental Health Service (NSRMHS) and has trained more than 80 police officers from Chatswood, North Sydney, Ryde and Eastwood since 2013. In the program, local police officers learn about local mental health services and how these services can assist with treating people in the community who may have a mental health issue.

During the training, police officers are given a tour of the mental health facilities at Royal North Shore Hospital (RNSH) and also hear from a mental health consumer about their personal experience, both in and out of hospital, and when in contact with the police.

Police officers who attend the training believe the sessions provides them with better working knowledge and skills for when they are helping mental health consumers in the community.

Sheila Nicolson-Wilson, coordinator of the NSRMHS Police Orientation Program, believes that the program is important to help police officers become more aware of the interventions available to them, and also serves as a reminder that situations with mental health consumers are not always predictable: "We encourage police officers to remember that when they are assisting a person in the community with a mental health issue, the situation as to why this person is acting in a particular way is not always black and white.

"Police officers now work in partnership with our community mental health staff to help determine the best course of action to provide treatment to these community members," said Sheila.

As part of the tour of mental health facilities, police officers are taken on a patient's journey from presentation in the Emergency Department, admission as an inpatient, and are shown what it is like to be cared for in these different areas of the hospital.

"Police officers are also taught different ways to engage with mental health consumers, including strategies to deescalate harmful or risky situations, such as, where the consumer is agitated. This skills based training is an important part of the program and all participants appreciate the benefits of this training," said Sheila.

"The program has been successful in improving communication between our mental health service and local police units, and as a result, we are working better together for the benefit of mental health consumers so that they can access help as early as possible."

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