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Mental Health Crisis Impacting Idaho Springs Community

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A message from Chief Nathan Buseck:

The current state of the mental health system is failing Idaho Springs residents and citizens of Colorado. Law enforcement across the state of Colorado is repeatedly dealing with individuals suffering from various mental illnesses. A significant number of these individuals also abuse alcohol and/or narcotics, further complicating the issue. Often these situations can be extremely dangerous for our citizens, the officers involved, and the person who is in crisis. Law enforcement continues to hold itself accountable and make strides to improve the overall outcomes during these interactions, through training such as Crisis Intervention, De-escalation, etc., along with working collaboratively with the Jefferson Center for Mental Health. The high profile and uncommon, newsworthy, events in which officers have used poor tactics and that led to poor outcomes are highlighted by the media. Those situations are rare, however, we as a profession, need to continue to improve. There are everyday interactions that occur between law enforcement and citizens in crisis that result in the person being safely taken to the hospital for evaluation/treatment. These situations occur on almost a daily basis for the officers of the Idaho Springs Police Department. Unfortunately, the ISPD is interacting with the same citizens in crisis, over and over, and there is a concern the mental health system is not protecting, nor providing the long-term care that many of these individuals require.

As a law enforcement leader, it is important to share concerns related to how health care, more specifically, the mental health system interacts with Colorado citizens, from the perspective of law enforcement. Here is a recent example of one person who has had numerous encounters with ISPD (name withheld for privacy/medical reasons). We will use the name "Joe" to describe encounters during the month of October 2022:

- October 3, 2022, 6:00 a.m. - Officers responded to a person trespassing at a business. Officers contacted Joe who was no longer allowed on the business' property due to yelling strange things about dwarfs, elves, and God killing his sons. Joe was not intoxicated but appeared to be in crisis and/or have a mental health issue. Joe was taken into custody and placed under an M1 hold (mental health hold) due to being a danger to himself. Joe was slightly resistive with officers but was not injured when taken into custody. Joe was transported to a hospital by ambulance.
- October 18th, 2022, 9:00 a.m. - Officers responded to a person yelling loudly and causing a disturbance near the city library and elementary school. Officers again contacted Joe, who had since been released from the hospital. Joe, again, was screaming about elves and the occult. Joe was very disheveled in appearance and did not appear to be able to care for himself, therefore Joe was again placed under an M1 hold. Joe became physically resistive to officers/deputies and punched an ISPD officer in the face.

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Joe was handcuffed and transported to the hospital. The ISPD officer who was struck was not injured. ISPD did not pursue criminal charges based on the totality of the circumstances, rather ISPD preferred to seek out mental health help/resources for Joe.

- October 26th, 2022, 10:15 a.m. - ISPD responded to the city library again due to Joe returning. Joe had broken numerous library rules and he had been trespassed from the property. Officers asked Joe to leave, and he left without issue. Joe did yell and scream while walking down the sidewalk.
- October 30th, 2022, 6:00 a.m. - ISPD responded to Safeway (2425 Miner St.) to a report of a man who was yelling and screaming. The Safeway employee said the man was scaring customers and was no longer allowed on the property. ISPD once again contacted Joe, who was yelling and screaming about elves and the occult. Joe was asked to leave the property and he did so without incident.
- October 30th, 2022, 8:53 p.m. - ISPD responded to Safeway (2425 Miner St.) to another report of the same man yelling. Officers spoke to the night manager who said the person could stay on the property, however they wanted law enforcement to be made aware of the man that was yelling. Officers identified the man as Joe; however, they did not interact with Joe at the request of the manager.
- October 31st, 2022, 12:25 p.m. – ISPD responded to the area of 1900 block of Miner St. to a report of a man holding two large knives and yelling. ISPD found the man, Joe, walking down the sidewalk, holding a large knife in each hand, and swinging the knives around in a violent manner (jumping up and cutting branches from a tree, yelling strange things). Once again, ISPD officers contacted Joe. Joe dropped the large knives when instructed by officers. Joe once again yelled about elves and the occult. Joe was clearly a danger to others by violently swinging two knives while walking down the sidewalk. Joe was again taken by ISPD to a hospital on a mental health hold. This was the **3rd mental health hold in twenty-eight days.**

Joe needs help. Officers and emergency personnel have continually taken Joe for help with his mental illness. We, in law enforcement, are pleading with state lawmakers, elected federal lawmakers, to invest in helping Colorado citizens like Joe. We have genuine concerns for Joe in the future. Will Joe hurt himself? Will Joe injure an innocent child or citizen? Will Joe injure an officer or put an officer in the unthinkable position to have to use deadly force?

ISPD has been partnering with the Clear Creek County Sheriff's Office and the Jefferson Center for Mental Health over the last year. Both agencies have had a mental health employee riding with an officer/deputy one day-a-week for one shift. This program has allowed for pro-active outreach, to try and offer resources to individuals in need of mental health resources. We have seen occasional "wins" in our current program. Currently, Clear Creek County has applied for a grant for a co-responder program, which Idaho Springs staunchly supports. Law enforcement and the line-level mental health establishment are doing their part to address the mental health crisis that is directly impacting our communities. Our biggest question is this, what is the health care community and government doing to better support long-term treatment for these individuals? There is outstanding and pro-active work being done by our law enforcement officers and mental health partners, however the ability to provide long-term care appears to be failing our communities. ISPD has not encountered Joe as of the writing of this commentary, however we are prepared to encounter Joe, not if he returns, but when he returns.

Photograph of the two knives taken from Joe on 10/31/2022.

