
From the Buffalo Business First:

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Sarah Bonk partners with police on mental health

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It's typical in police work to have a partner.

But most officers likely never had one like Sarah Bonk.

With a background in psychology, social work and crisis intervention, she brings a unique mindset to the Town of Cheektowaga Police Department as its first mental health and substance abuse specialist.

"I've been doing this type of work for six years now and am going into my seventh year, so it's definitely right where I found myself wanting to be," she said.

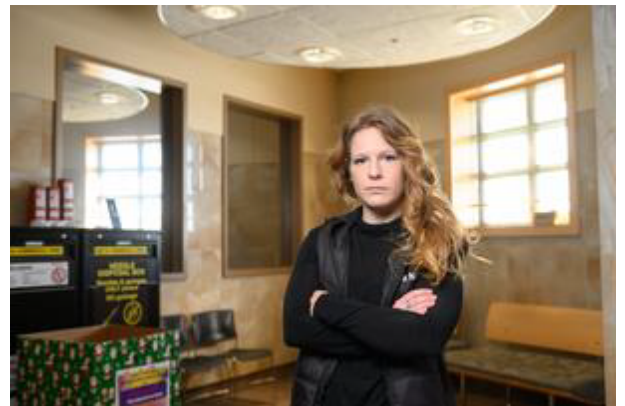
For Bonk, who is employed with the department through Endeavor Health Services, the position is the culmination of nearly a decade of study of the human mind, mental health and police work.

She started there in 2019 after completing a master's degree in social work.

In many respects, it is her dream job.

"I would say so," she said.

Bonk spent the early portion of her career in crisis-prevention roles with Buffalo City Court and Erie County government.



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Sarah Bonk is a mental health and substance abuse specialist with the Town of Cheektowaga Police Department.

She now reaches out to people who have had interactions with Cheektowaga police to see how mental health treatment can help them move on with their lives and take positive steps forward.

“If somebody is a teenager and they’ve had some really traumatic life experiences, the likelihood that they’re going to end up in the criminal justice system is a lot higher,” she said. “That trauma can also turn into mental health symptoms such as (post-traumatic stress disorder), depression, anxiety and (more).”

“It’s important that we intervene earlier (when possible) so that we eventually prevent them from coming into the (system).”

The concept is considered revolutionary in police circles. Some around the country have implemented similar programs and Bonk said she’s heard from municipalities in Western New York looking to do the same.

“It’s more of a centralized type of service (that’s) really bringing a clinical skill set to the police department and not just a referral point,” she said.

Cheektowaga was an early adopter of how a mental health approach could change police work, Bonk said.

In 2012, the department started crisis intervention training, she said. It continued to work with different agencies over the years and last year, after a review of options, the police took their clinical services a step forward by contracting with Endeavor to have a full-time liaison work in tandem with police.

“On the day-to-day (job), you kind of forget that you’re on the rising curve of the trend,” Bonk said. “But when you take a step back (and think about it), it’s fascinating but it’s also a lot of pressure.

“I think that people don’t necessarily appreciate the kind of pressure that comes from a position like this because you’re balancing the safety of the community, the safety of the individual and the safety of the police department. You’re also trying to balance the two worlds of a person-centered (treatment) approach with the criminal justice system.”

In December, less than six months after she started, Bonk estimated that she had already helped 200 people.

She and police now aim to inform more people of the program's existence along with the evaluation of suicide-prevention tools.

The ultimate goal is to deter future crime and simultaneously keep people out of the justice system.

So far, treated individuals have been receptive and appreciative, Bonk said.

"I like the immediate intervention (aspect) of it," she said. "In a moment of crisis, it's important to me that I'm there ... and that I can just build a bridge with somebody enough. Even if we don't fix what's going on for them in that moment, the relationship is built enough that I can come back the next day and they're comfortable with me."

Patrick Connelly

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