

Use of lethal force sparked calls for change years ago

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The killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis Police on Memorial Day weekend highlights the ongoing crisis of police brutality against people of color. Unfortunately, use of lethal force is not a new issue for people with disabilities. And of course there is sad intersectionality when people of color who also identify as disabled are injured or killed.

The calls for law enforcement reform in deadly force cases involving people with disabilities are nothing new. More issues surfaced starting in the early 1980s, in the face of sweeping deinstitutionalization in Minnesota. Too many people lacked safe and supportive housing environments after they left state institutions.

Calls for the Minneapolis Police Department to make mental health-related reforms date from the 1980s, when police and mental health community leaders scrutinized incidents involving people with mental illness. Police and mental health care providers in 1986 began meeting in roundtable setting to share concerns and discuss solutions. That focus grew to include other disabilities including brain injuries and autism.

Tragedies in 1999-2000 brought a renewed focus to the need for education and training in the context of suspects with mental illness and other disabilities. In the span of a year, Minneapolis Police shot and killed three suspects who were living with mental illness.

Two of the killings not only prompted demands for change, but spurred the formation of nonprofit organizations dedicated to education and activism centered on police brutality, the need for officer training and changes in law enforcement culture.

Communities United Against Police Brutality (CUAPB) is an all-volunteer organization that was formed in December 2000 in the aftermath of the December 1999 shooting death of Charles “Abuka” Sanders by Minneapolis police. The organization’s website states, “As we worked to try to achieve justice for Abuka’s family, we came to the realization that while many people respond in powerful ways to brutal police killings and other egregious incidents, handling each case separately is not an effective way to deal with police brutality. Reinventing the wheel with each new case is reactive, not proactive, and almost assures there will be more cases.”

According to news reports, Sanders drove a motor vehicle at police before he was shot and killed. That tragedy happened hours after family members unsuccessfully tried to have him hospitalized for a mental health evaluation. He had been diagnosed with a mental illness the year before.

The Barbara Schneider Foundation began after the June 2000 police shooting of a woman in her Uptown apartment. Schneider, who held two master’s degrees and was known for work on social justice and community issues, lived with mental illness. She was shot and killed after walking toward officers while holding a knife, when she was in crisis.

The foundation over the years has worked with partners in law enforcement, courts, corrections, mental health, social service and health care systems to improve the response to those in mental health crisis and to prevent mental health crises. One focus is the creation of crisis intervention teams.

The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the [Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities](#) and [Partners in Policymaking](#).