

Where do we put troubled souls?

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SANTA CRUZ — The ending for fugitive Leslie Grover Wyman came quietly, but the dust has not settled on the big issue raised in the wake of the shooting last week of a sheriff's deputy and highway patrolman: What should society do with the criminally insane?

Wyman, 44, had a history of mental illness that spanned more than a decade. He was treated at the Veteran's Administration Hospital in Palo Alto in 1971 and released — a year before he was charged with assaulting three rangers with the San Francisco Water District.

Psychiatrists diagnosed Wyman at that time as a paranoid schizophrenic and committed him to a state mental facility. After seven months, Wyman was released.

Authorities say now that Wyman went in and out of mental health facilities for years. He suffered delusions of a grand conspiracy. Wyman believed he was the object of a vast law-enforcement conspiracy to get him, one official said.

"In one sense, his symptoms were classic for a paranoid schizophrenic," said one official.

Santa Cruz Police Chief Jack Bassett said, "The law has given police a little authority in picking up people that are displaying actions...that we'd classify as dangerous to ourselves or others."

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"But the big mental health question is an economic one for this county," he said.

The county runs a neuropsychiatric ward which can house up to 18 mentally disturbed persons.

As District Attorney Art Danner put it, "This is totally inadequate."

Bassett said the majority of persons police pick up for 72-hour evaluations are released — primarily because there's no space to hold them.

"The police role is stretched far beyond its own mission," said Bassett. "We need some place to house these people and give them treatment."

The state used to run facilities for the mentally ill, but in the late 1960s, then-Gov. Ronald Reagan took action to close many of those hospitals, noted Assistant District Attorney Ralph Boroff.

The local mental health departments were left to treat the needs of those turned away at the state level. As Boroff said, "We don't have enough bodies to handle these people."

The county mental health system — like all other agencies funded by the county — has been hit with cutbacks. At the June budget hearings, some 19 positions were eliminated — effectively scuttling the Community Mental Health Services division of the Health Services Agency.

Gone now are services for those with mild dysfunctional problems.

According to an assistant district attorney in San Mateo County, Wyman was found to be somewhat in this psychiatric realm last year when he was picked up on weapons charges in San Mateo.

After a psychiatrist diagnosed Wyman as capable of understanding the charges against him and therefore able to stand trial, prosecutors looked at the amount of time Wyman would receive on the charge and decided to let him plead "no contest" to resisting arrest and possession of a firearm. He was put on a two-year unsupervised probation.

As Danner said, once the psychiatric evaluations are in and doctors say someone is sane, there's not much more a prosecutor can do.

Danner says the problem with the system now is three-fold: The criminal standard for finding someone insane is too liberal, thus many persons accused of serious crimes are being committed to institutions where they serve far less time than they would if they were found guilty; the civil standard for committing mentally ill persons to institutions is too strict and keeps many persons on the streets whose families would like them committed; and the facilities to treat the mentally ill are totally inadequate.

Also, Danner and Boroff place part of the blame on criminal defense attorneys, who work to keep their clients on the street, rather than to get them treatment, particularly if the offense is considered not serious.

"Mental health is the DMZ (demilitarized zone) — the no-man's land — of the law," said Danner. "It's a very tough area to deal with."

Whether Monday's tragic shooting could have been avoided is a question many people will be asking for quite some time.

Said Chief Bassett, "It's (Wyman's suicide) a useless end to a useless beginning. It doesn't give the community any sense of completion. The only thing that can give them that is quick and swift justice."