



For Immediate Release

Press Release

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From: The National Alliance on Mental Illness of Virginia (NAMI Virginia)

Subject: The tragic death of Irvo Otieno stresses the need for reform in Virginia's mental health and criminal justice systems

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NAMI Virginia is deeply saddened by the senseless and horrific death of Irvo Otieno. Mr. Otieno was in mental health crisis, taken to Central State Hospital, and held down according to Dinwiddie County Commonwealth's Attorney, Ann Cabell Baskervill. Being held down caused Mr. Otieno to die of asphyxiation by smothering. Seven Henrico County sheriff's deputies and three hospital security guards have been charged with second-degree murder in the death of Mr. Otieno.

Virginia's mental health system has been in need of revamping for years! Virginia's criminal justice system is not equipped to respond to mental health medical emergencies. Mental illness is a medical issue, not a criminal issue. Consideration and care of the patient must always come first. NAMI Virginia is deeply saddened that far too often in Virginia, individuals with a mental illness, a treatable medical condition, are criminalized and treated inhumanely as opposed to being provided with medical care. Mr. Otieno was experiencing a mental health crisis. He required medical intervention but instead was met with force.

NAMI Virginia continues to advocate for a revamping of Virginia's mental health system, Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training, jail diversion programs, the use of kind, non-combative de-escalation training, increased education, and the need to have knowledgeable, empathetic mental health professionals in the leading role in crisis situations to mitigate violent outcomes for those experiencing symptoms of a mental illness.

The purpose of CIT is to change the nature and perception of crisis calls to allow for effective field intervention. But, as we have seen through the senseless deaths of Irvo Otieno, Marcus

David Peters, George Floyd, and too many others, more needs to be done. Police officers and emergency responders must be mandated to respond to mental health crises as medical emergencies - not criminal ones. Virginias mental health and criminal justice systems urgently need reforms that include funding, services to meet people where they are in stages of illness, education, accountability, and personnel trained to protect the patient and put the patient's needs first.

One in five Virginians experiences a mental illness each year. The population of Virginia in 2021 was 8,642,000 people. That means that 1,728,400 million of our friends, family, neighbors, and our other fellow Virginians, are affected by mental illness each year. System transformation is long overdue in Virginia. System transformation is urgently needed before we lose more good people with treatable medical conditions to a cruel, senseless death!

The loss of Irvo Otieno is never far from the minds of the mental health community. NAMI Virginia continues to be on the frontline in the fight for system transformation of Virginia's behavioral health system.