

Florida commission says mental health system needs overhaul

October 16 2019, by Terry Spencer

Florida's mental health system is underfunded and needs to be overhauled, with better coordination between providers, law enforcement and educators, the commission investigating last year's high school massacre recommended to the legislature Wednesday.

The Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission, meeting in Orlando, found that the state's [mental health system](#) is too often a revolving door. Under Florida's Baker Act, which allows a [police officer](#), judge or [mental health](#) professional to involuntarily commit a person for a 72-hour evaluation, less than 1% of the 200,000 people examined last year received long-term treatment, the commission found.

Many were released in less than a day despite repeated commitments because the system is set up to treat the immediate crisis that led to the Baker Act being implemented and not toward long-term treatment, the commission found. It also found that Florida ranks near the bottom among states in per capita spending on mental [health](#) at about \$36 annually per resident, which the commission said contributes to short-term fixes instead of long-term solutions.

Pinellas County Sheriff Bob Gualtieri, the commission's chairman, said his department is now dealing with a 14-year-old who has threatened to commit a school massacre, rape teachers and shoot police officers. He said the boy has been committed under the Baker Act 35 times since age 8 and arrested 14 times, but is always released.

Gualtieri said records compiled by [law enforcement](#), schools and the mental health system are often kept separately, so it wasn't until recently when an analyst in his office did a threat assessment of the teen that a full picture was compiled. He compared the boy to Nikolas Cruz, who is charged with killing 17 people in last year's Stoneman Douglas shooting. Cruz had severe emotional and behavioral issues but was never hospitalized.

"There was no holistic view of this child and, importantly, nobody owned the problems with this kid," Gualtieri said of the Pinellas County teen. "When I read that threat assessment report, there was just a big pause. ... There was nothing in the system to say, 'Hold on, there is something seriously, seriously wrong here.'"

Commissioner Mike Carroll, former head of the state's Department of Children and Families, said the system lacks accountability for both the child and the parents. A judge can order a program addressing the child's behavioral or emotional problems, but has no power to impose consequences if the program isn't followed, he said. That must change, he said.

"If I had diabetes and went to the doctor, no one would ask why this program isn't working if the person wouldn't take their insulin shots," Carroll said.

Gualtieri said many teens and adults when confronted by police have learned to act as if they are severely mentally ill to avoid arrest. Then when they are evaluated under the Baker Act by a medical professional, they act normal and are released, he said. For many, the process repeats over and over, he said.

"We are on the hamster wheel," Gualtieri said. "People have this idea that if you Baker Act, you are going to solve all the problems."

The 15-member commission is composed of law enforcement, education and [mental health professionals](#), a legislator and the fathers of two students slain in the massacre. It is completing its second annual report aimed at preventing future school shootings.

Cruz, 21, had a long history of mental health issues, court records show. Those included making threats at school, fights, vandalism, and other inappropriate behavior. He spent years being periodically assigned to a [school](#) for students with behavioral and [emotional problems](#) before he was allowed to briefly attend Stoneman Douglas. He was kicked out in early 2017.

Cruz's attorneys have said he would plead guilty in exchange for a life sentence, an offer prosecutors have declined. They are seeking the death penalty.

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