



# THE PLAIN DEALER

## Ohio has to provide better help for the mentally ill - an editorial

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Ohio will have to spend billions of dollars to reach the tens of thousands of citizens with untreated mental illness. But continuing to neglect these people costs even more.

Cleveland Heights Police Officer Jason West paid with his life May 26, partly as a result of the state's tattered and ill-funded approach. Timothy Halton, a 27-year-old man given to violent episodes and delusions since his teens, shot and killed West amid a street brawl in May.

The tragedy spurred outpourings of sympathy and support both in Cleveland Heights and at West's funeral in Lorain County. Since then, various groups have held fund-raisers for West's family, and mental health advocates have urged increased aid for their work. To date, however, officials have offered little in the way of significant reforms.

Recently, Plain Dealer reporters Harlan Spector and Diane Suchetka detailed the scope of the mental health issue in Ohio and possible measures to improve the system. Some of the numbers - such as the \$6.5 billion cost of working with Ohioans with untreated mental illnesses - could panic taxpayers.

Yet such fears should not paralyze policy-makers. For one thing, certain modest steps could have outsized impact. One example: State lawmakers can update Ohio law to make it easier to force mentally ill individuals to get help. New York, Michigan and California all have such a law, which could have helped Halton and saved West.

Ohio's budget already includes new dollars to enhance early childhood screenings for medical and behavioral issues. That demonstrates a growing awareness of the value of identifying potential problems before they result in real damage. Gov. Ted Strickland and the legislature now must track carefully the impact of these initiatives to ensure that dollars go where they're promised and those diagnosed with needs actually get treatment. Done right, this effort could save more than the state spends over time.

Jason West's death is a tragedy that his loved ones will endure for the rest of their lives. It is incumbent upon the rest of us to remember and honor his sacrifice. A first step toward that end would be to enact measures that prevent future devastating losses by targeting help where and when it's needed.

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