

NEWSLETTER

Q&A with Wesam Shahed, Esq.

Assistant State's Attorney
for Cook County, Illinois



Q&A with Wesam Shahed, Esq., Assistant State's Attorney for Cook County, Illinois

Tell us about your path to becoming a prosecutor and how your involvement in a mental health court influenced your perspective.

In my first year of law school, I interned for a trial court judge who presided over a specialty court for people with mental health issues and drug and alcohol use. The opportunity allowed me to attend "graduation day" for those who completed their work through court-assigned programs.

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San Francisco Street Crisis Response Team Reduces Law Enforcement Involvement

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In many cities in the United States, police are the first line of response for people in mental health crisis. These interactions may lead to justice involvement or a visit to the emergency department (ED) but rarely resolve the underlying mental health concern of the person in crisis. While some police departments have been working to build competence and capacity in behavioral health, many cities have begun to build alternative response programs for individuals in crisis. That is the case in San Francisco, where a dedicated crisis response team works to reduce law enforcement involvement and unnecessary ED use related to mental health crises.

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988 Implementation in Rural Communities

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Since 2019, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), along with other federal, state, and local partners, have worked to centralize and standardize the crisis call system. This work is one part of SAMHSA's overarching goal to transform the nation's behavioral health crisis care system, so that services are available to "anyone, anywhere, anytime." In 2022, the three-digit 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline was launched. Consolidating and expanding upon the Suicide Lifeline and the Veterans Crisis line, 988 is intended to function much like 911 in that any person anywhere in the country can dial or text those three digits and be connected to a trained professional to help them address a suicidal, mental health, and/or substance use crisis. Beyond simply finding a trained resource at the other end of the phone line, the ultimate goal is for 988 to become part of a comprehensive crisis care network that includes mobile crisis team response and linkage to crisis stabilization units.

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