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**Rhode Island Council of
Community Mental Health
Organizations, Inc.**

March 3, 2008

Chief John M. LaCross
Barrington Police Department
100 Federal Road
Barrington, RI 02806

Dear Chief LaCross,

Having two people die at the hands of police in Rhode Island in the space of two weeks is cause for great concern. That both victims had mental illness and met their fate only because their families had called the police for help is cause for even greater alarm.

In the case of the fatal shooting of Jason Swift by the Pawtucket Police, his mother had called for help in getting him to the hospital. She had done this before, apparently without incident, in Massachusetts. Here, however, the results were lethal. While many questions still surround the more recent death of Leonel Farias by East Providence police, here too a person known to have a mental illness faced a fatal encounter with police during an escalating struggle.

We realize that investigations of these two incidents are ongoing, and we do not seek to cast blame on the police officers involved. Rather, our point is that these two tragic incidents demonstrate the critical and urgent need for uniform and comprehensive training of all police in Rhode Island to ensure a proper response to persons with mental illness, cognitive impairments or developmental disabilities. Indeed, the police officers involved in these incidents may be victims as well, as they are forced to grapple with the consequences of being inadequately trained to deal with these situations.

It was only recently that the Municipal Police Academy began to provide any training to recruits on this matter. However, that training is just an introduction to longer-term, more comprehensive training that officers need to receive through ongoing in-service and specialized skills instruction. To their credit, some police departments on their own, in consultation with community mental health providers, have initiated specialized training to help their officers deal with these scenarios when they arise. But as these two recent confrontations show, the status quo is woefully insufficient. Broader and more comprehensive training is essential if more tragedies are not to take place.

This is not a novel issue. A well-recognized report by the Criminal Justice/Mental Health Consensus Project provides numerous recommendations on the development of written response protocols and training in the use of non-

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confrontational de-escalation techniques by the police to stabilize the scene and ensure the safety of all involved parties when confronting a person with mental illness. The Project offers numerous examples of collaborative programs with community mental health agencies, including a national model for crisis intervention already in use in 35 states. Our organizations stand ready to provide assistance and guidance to you at the state and local level.

The family members of individuals with mental illness must feel comfortable picking up the phone and calling 911 when help for a loved one is needed. In light of these two deaths, that comfort level is very shaky right now. These two tragedies are a siren call to police agencies that this issue must be addressed more thoroughly, and with dispatch and rigor. We therefore call on all police departments to not wait a moment longer, and to work with the community in ensuring that future cries for help do not turn into tears of grief.

Sincerely,


Elizabeth V. Earls, President/CEO
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