Through its Interagency Outreach Training Initiative program, the CPD supported crisis intervention training for 8 years. When people close to Utah’s Crisis Intervention Training program talk about dealing with people in a mental health crisis, they use the word “de-escalate” a lot. De-escalation is the difference between upsetting people in a mental health crisis and calming them down; between making an arrest or referring someone to the help they need; between showing force and saving lives. For people with mental illness and their families, de-escalation is essential. The CPD’s Interagency Outreach Training Initiative has helped fund Crisis Intervention Training in Utah for eight years, helping officers learn techniques that help diffuse a mental health crisis. CIT training is provided by mental health and law enforcement professionals outside the CPD, who have used the IOTI funds to educate law enforcement officers. Mental health professionals have watched the transition as CIT officers began operating in the state, and they have seen what a difference it makes. The program has eased the fears of families. They can ask for CIT officers who are trained to recognize and deal with the symptoms of mental illness in a compassionate, non-threatening way. “It makes all the difference, first of all for the person with the mental illness,” said Sherri Wittwer, executive director of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill-Utah. CIT-trained officers understand how symptoms of mental illness are manifested as behaviors, and they know how to calm people in crisis and direct them to treatment. It has been a great help to families who might otherwise hesitate to call in law enforcement for fear of making a bad situation worse. “When we can say, ‘You can call a law enforcement officer,’ it is a huge relief to them,” said Wittwer.

NAMI-Utah assists with the training and helps promote the CIT program throughout the state. “It’s had a significant impact on our community,” said Richard Hatch, chief clinical officer at Valley Mental Health. (VMH provides behavioral health care for Salt Lake, Summit and Tooele counties.) When officers respond appropriately to people in a mental health crisis, they can calm them down rather than use force and provoke behavior that might lead to an arrest. “We really value that partnership,” he said. “We support them and they support us.”

In fact, there are times when mental health professionals and officers will respond together to a situation, he said. Mental health professionals agree with Detective Ron Bruno, the CIT program director, when they say the program enhances safety for both those in crisis and the officers who respond. “If we can understand how a person sees life we can get them to do what we want them to do,” Bruno said. “It absolutely can save lives..... As I review reports from CIT officers I can really see how things could have been worse.”

What’s more, the CIT program teaches techniques that may not be intuitive, and that may be very different from the strategies used for criminal activity with no mental health crisis. Bruno explained the difference this way: if people get in an argument and start hitting each other with sticks, CIT officers are not necessarily needed. If a person swings a stick at everyone who passes on the sidewalk, crisis intervention is appropriate.

In the second scenario, the person in crisis may not want to behave aggressively, but is reacting to something
he experiences internally. CIT officers are trained to recognize signs of a mental health crisis, and even to recognize the type of crisis, since, for example, a person with severe depression might need a different technique from a person with paranoia.

So far, 11 percent of the officers in the state are CIT certified. Bruno said the goal is to bring that percentage up to 25.

The 11 percent figure is a statewide average, said NAMI-Utah’s Wittwer. The coverage is thinner in rural Utah; in some communities a CIT-trained officer is not available. Professionals agree there is a lot of work left to do, but it’s work they enjoy doing—and it ends up saving lives.