

A nurse and a police officer from the mobile crisis-intervention team console a man who threatened suicide



CRISIS INTERVENTION

REACHING OUT

Beyond the hospital walls, St. Mike's halts emergencies before they hit the ER

NURSE ELLEN MARCHILDON and Constable Lisa Belanger gently guide a thirty-something woman out of a police car and into the emergency room. The woman doesn't seem to know them today, though normally they are all on a first-name basis. Marchildon and Belanger have helped her before, during earlier dramas when she would insist on being admitted to the hospital. Indeed, says Marchildon, a senior crisis worker on the mobile crisis-intervention team (MCIT), the troubled woman (whose name is withheld to protect her privacy) used to show up at the hospital regularly. Lately, however, she has been isolating herself in her room at a group home, not showering or taking care of herself. But that

doesn't mean the hospital no longer serves her. When case manager Kam Bardouille from St. Michael's dropped by and realized she was in bad shape, Bardouille asked the MCIT to take the woman to the hospital. The home's staff reported she had lain down in the middle of a road. Marchildon decides she is a danger to herself—grounds for Belanger to use powers of arrest if necessary. At the hospital they shepherd her through the chaotic ER and into a quiet room for psychiatric patients, then entrust her to staff. MCIT, an arm of the hospital's emergency psychiatric services, is just one way St. Michael's reaches out to some of the most marginalized people in Toronto's downtown. Most of its patients have mental disorders such as schizophrenia and often substance-abuse problems as well. Many live in shelters or on the street. The team was created to help police swamped with calls from emotionally disturbed indi-

viduals, which often led to unnecessary arrests or trips to the ER. "It's a challenge to learn to work with a totally different discipline," Marchildon says, but adds that a nurse and an officer with access to health and police records can make better decisions about appropriate responses. Sometimes MCIT helps people through a crisis right where they are. Late the same night, a call comes over the radio. A 66-year-old man has told the 911 operator that he wants to throw himself out his apartment window. Two paramedics and a pair of cops also respond, but when the man opens his door, they see he's not in immediate danger. Marchildon tells them they can go. "I'm so lonely," the man tells her, burying his face in his hands to cry. Marchildon listens as the widower talks about being alone and having terrifying nightmares. He tried to kill himself last year. "We're here tonight to try to make a plan so you'll feel safe for tonight," she says. Her plan includes giving him the phone number for a crisis center as well as a distress-line number that he can call to talk to someone when he feels lonely. When Marchildon checks in on him the next day, he says he had a "beautiful" sleep—no nightmares. She asks whether it would be all right if Bella French, a crisis follow-up worker, came to visit. "I think you'd really like Bella," Marchildon says. "Yes, that might be good," he says. One small step for this troubled man. One crisis at a time for MCIT. —By Leigh Anne Williams

PIETER SIBBALD FOR TIME