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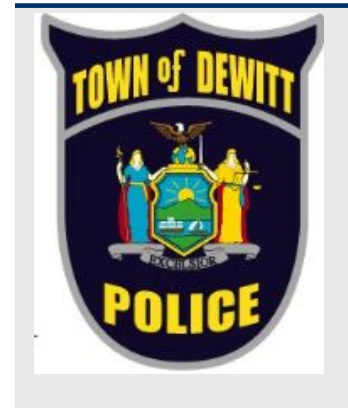
Disabilities and Special Needs: DeWitt, New York, Police Department's Training Program on Communicating with Individuals Who Are Deaf and Hard of Hearing

PRACTICE

The town of DeWitt, New York's Police Department collaborated with local deaf social services agencies to teach police officers strategies for communicating with individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing.

DESCRIPTION

In September 2006, a DeWitt, New York, police officer was conducting a traffic stop in a McDonald's parking lot when he noticed a driver parked nearby in a sport utility vehicle (SUV) flailing his arms and motioning to a female companion. This behavior alarmed the police officer, and he approached the SUV to investigate. The officer motioned for the driver to roll down his windows and learned that the driver was deaf. The officer attempted to communicate with the driver with hand signals and by speaking slowly so that the driver could read his lips. The police officer asked the driver to get out of the SUV, and then frisked him to make sure he was not carrying any weapons. The driver did not understand what was happening, so he pushed the police officer's hands away. The police officer feared that the driver would hurt him and pushed the driver to the ground to control him while calling for help. In the police report, the driver said that he did not intend to hurt the police officer. He did not understand why the police officer was touching him and felt violated, so he pushed the officer's hands away. Although the driver did not file any charges against the police officer, the police officer later resigned over the incident.



DeWitt Police Department realized as a result of this incident that police officers need to learn how to communicate with citizens who are deaf and hard of hearing. In addition, DeWitt Fire Department realized that people who have hearing impairments often fear they will be injured in an emergency because they might not understand what police officers or firefighters want them to do.

The DeWitt police chief asked WHOLE ME to develop a training program on communicating with individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing. WHOLE ME worked with Aurora of Central New York and the Deaf Advocacy Council to create a program that teaches

WHOLE ME

(Work, Health, Organizational skills, Life experiences, Entertainment choices, Math and English) is a non-profit organization that provides opportunities for deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals and their families. To learn more about training opportunities, see the [WHOLE ME](#) Web site.

police officers what communication challenges that individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing face.

All 70 DeWitt police officers took the training program in November 2006. The DeWitt police chief also invited members of DeWitt's three fire departments, East Syracuse police, and EAVES ambulance services to participate in the training.

During the first part of the one-day training session, attendees participated in three role playing exercises involving a courtroom, an emergency room, and a traffic stop. In each scenario, an individual from WHOLE ME or Aurora who is deaf took over the typical law enforcement role: in the courtroom, the judge was deaf; in the emergency room, the nurse was deaf; and at the traffic stop, the police officer was deaf. Trainees participated by playing non-law enforcement roles, such as an injured emergency room patient or a driver pulled over for suspicious activity. In each scenario, law enforcement trainees encountered similar difficulties communicating with the deaf role players who only used American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate. Trainees misunderstood most of what the "law enforcers" who were deaf were saying. For example, in the emergency room, the nurse who was deaf distributed intake forms to be admitted to the hospital only in ASL, which trainees could not understand and therefore could not fill out. In the courtroom, the judge who was deaf used ASL to sentence a trainee who believed he was being prosecuted for a routine traffic violation to a long prison sentence. At the traffic stop, a hearing driver had trouble explaining to a police officer who was deaf why he had an empty beer bottle in his car.

After participants completed all three scenarios, WHOLE ME conducted a question and answer period to address trainees' feelings, frustrations, and lessons learned from the activities. During the discussion, trainees noted how difficult it was to communicate with the deaf role players and how frustrating it was not to fully understand. Trainees also made specific recommendations regarding how to overcome communication challenges. For example, trainees recommended that drivers who cannot hear or speak well should keep a decal in their car's visor that alerts the police officer.

After completing the scenarios and discussion, participants listened to firsthand accounts from individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing and had interacted with police officers. The training also included an "unfair" hearing test that played words and sentences with certain frequencies eliminated to simulate hearing loss. The program provided several communication strategies for responders to overcome barriers with people who cannot hear:

- Speak at an appropriate pace, not too quickly or too slowly. Avoid over-enunciation. Increasing one's volume does not help, and yelling distorts the face and makes reading lips more difficult.
- Speech reading or lip reading cannot be relied on since only 30-35% of the English language is visible on lips.
- Get the person's attention with a tap on the shoulder or by a wave of the hand.
- Convey concern with notes and gestures. Say things such as "stay calm" or "I am here to help."
- Provide physical or visual guidance as needed.

The training taught DeWitt police officers and other participants about the unique challenges they might encounter when trying to communicate with individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing in a law enforcement or emergency situation. After the training, DeWitt Police Department and WHOLE ME collected feedback from the trainees. Participants found the idea of the training as well as the program itself important, worthwhile, and well-suited for law enforcement personnel. DeWitt Police Department decided to use the training program in the future, and WHOLE ME has volunteered to provide the training wherever jurisdictions request it.

CITATIONS

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