

The Intelligencer

Crisis Intervention Team in Bucks County adds new members

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Bucks County's Crisis Intervention Team is comprised of police officers and first responders who complete a week-long course that stresses de-escalation when responding to calls involving people with mental illness. The county's 20th class graduated on Friday and officials are hoping county funding can allow even more to receive the training in the future.

Police confronted a man riding a bike along the divider line of Almshouse Road and yelling about the need to slow down traffic.

In a direct but calming manner, the officer exchanged names with the man to make him feel at ease before convincing him to move out of the middle of the roadway and continue their chat in a safer area.

The interaction was only a simulation, occurring inside a classroom Friday at the Bucks County Public Safety Training Center in Doylestown Township, but it was based on an actual police call — one of many involving the man, who suffers from mental illness.

Described as a frequent flyer by Northampton police Sgt. Stephen Kingsdorf, the man was portrayed by another officer during a role-play module as part of the ongoing Crisis Intervention Team training for first responders.

Kingsdorf serves as an instructor at the week-long sessions and is co-chair of the CIT

Task Force.

The course offers specialized training for officers responding to a wide range of conditions like Alzheimer's disease, autism, eating disorders or someone threatening suicide. The results of the classes, which urge de-escalation, can be seen throughout the county and specifically in the case of the man portrayed in the simulation, says Kingsdorf.

Northampton officers were instructed to build a rapport with the man and his family and to call his mother immediately when he was found to be in a situation that presented potential danger to himself or others.

Officers approach the situation as supportive rather than confrontational.

"We went from one philosophy to another and it's paid dividends," Kingsdorf told the class, noting that police contacts with the man occurred about six to 10 times per year, but have since dropped off to the point where he hasn't been involved in an incident in the last three years.

While many such calls involve a person in crisis who might not remember how it got started, "they will remember how they are treated," said the sergeant.

Friday's graduating class — the 20th since CIT training began in Bucks in 2008 — included members of Bensalem EMS, the FBI, Bucks County Juvenile Probation and police officers from Central Bucks Regional, Lower Southampton, Bensalem, Bristol Borough, Middletown, New Britain Township, Tullytown and Slate Belt Regional police in Northampton County.

In addition to instructors simulating people experiencing a mental health crisis, officers also heard from a woman who struggles with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder on a daily basis.

She shared details of her condition, answered questions about how she copes and offered recommendations to officers on ways they can respond to certain situations.

The woman also played roles in the simulation exercise along with CIT Co-Chair Sharon Curran, the chief operations officer of Lenape Valley Foundation, where the woman also works.

Last week's class marks an expansion for the county, which previously only operated two annual sessions.

It was made possible, in part, due to reallocation of funds in the county's Mental Health/Developmental Programs Department budget to the tune of \$10,000 in scholarships. Some of that money allowed Tullytown — a small borough with limited manpower — to defray the costs of additional shifts for officers to provide coverage while others spent the week at training.

County Commissioner Diane Marseglia, has been her practice, attended Friday's graduation ceremony.

She called the training "crucial" and expects similar funding streams to become available to put even more officers through the program.

Marseglia said she's proud the county's 911 center now has a "CIT button" that dispatchers can press to quickly find where the nearest CIT-trained officer is on duty.

"It's important, with all of this training, that we get the right person to respond to a call," she added.

Expanding the program has long been a goal of District Attorney Matthew Weintraub, who said he'd like to see every cop in the county go through the CIT course.

"Not every incident needs to result in a police confrontation or an arrest or, even worse, with somebody getting hurt or killed. This is the antidote to that," Weintraub said recently. "This is the way for police to look at an incident and think about what kind of resources they can get for someone that really just needs help rather than locking them up."

Middletown police Officer Melissa Robison went from student to teacher, now serving

as a CIT instructor.

The class's specificity is unique, she said.

"There's so many special instances where you can't just blanket respond," she added.

While the bulk of the course gives officers ways to respond to incidents on the street, sections of the training encouraged them to look inward and attempt to identify and address any mental effects they or their co-workers might be dealing with as a result of the high -stress, sometimes traumatic, environment of their jobs.

As potential symptoms experienced by first responders were discussed, Bristol Borough police Sgt. Pete Faight said he couldn't help but take stock of his own mental well being.

"We have all these folks tell you that when it starts to interfere with things you're doing normally in life, we're here to talk to you," said Faight, a veteran cop with 20 years on the job. "The training is a great foundation to build on."