

Promising Practices for Officers Interacting with I/DD Individuals

Voiceover

00:00

Welcome to *The Beat*—a podcast series from the COPS Office and the Department of Justice. Featuring interviews with experts from a varied field of disciplines. *The Beat* provides law enforcement with the latest developments and trending topics in community policing.

Today we have two guests who are joining us by phone.

Jennifer Donelan

00:20

Hello, I'm Jennifer Donelan and welcome to *The Beat*. I'm your host. Today we are going to be speaking about Promising Practices at the intersection of policing and disability, and joining us for this all important discussion is Travis Akins.

He's a retired officer and founder of the Growth Through Opportunity program. Also joining us is Leigh Ann Davis. Leigh Ann Davis is the Director of the Criminal Justice Initiatives at The Arc of the United States. We want to thank both of you for joining us.

There's been growing interest among police officers about how to best serve citizens with different types of intellectual and developmental disabilities, and we've seen an increase in Autism specifically. Travis, do you think most officers feel equipped to communicate and interact with this population?

Officer Travis Akins (ret.)

01:06

Unfortunately, not. I'm a firm believer that officers absolutely want to do the right thing and they're seeking this training all across the country. However, there's also a fear of the unknown in human beings. It's just human nature as a—and most officers have extremely limited positive experiences and exposure to a lot of different individuals with autism spectrum disorder as well as other related intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Typically, autism is an invisible disorder. Unless it's coupled with, for example, Down Syndrome or Cerebral Palsy or something that's considered a comorbid disorder, it's very difficult and very challenging for law enforcement officers to be able to identify upon first contact individuals with an autism spectrum disorder.

Many times, people with a spectrum of autism, and it is a very broad spectrum, the old saying in the world disabilities is, if you've met one person with autism, you've honestly only met one person with autism. They're vastly unique, vastly different just like you and I. Their behaviors often get misinterpreted and as someone who potentially could be intoxicated or have substance abuse issues,

which often causes officers to wrongfully make impactful decisions, sometimes very severe, if not fatal decisions, surely, based on a lack of knowledge and understanding and a lot of professional career development that is lacking throughout the United States.

We need to increase those first-hand positive exposures and experiences for first responders as well as for the individuals that have these unique challenges all across the nation.

Donelan

02:48

Leigh Ann, your thoughts?

Director Leigh Ann Davis

02:50

I agree with Travis and I think for the most part we haven't been able to get the training to officers that they need when it comes to being able to identify people with different types of intellectual and developmental disabilities.

While there is some training available for officers through Crisis Intervention Team or CIT training, it often focuses more on mental health or mental illness and it may or not have up to date information or accurate information about people with intellectual and development disability.

So, both Travis and I have been working to ensure that officers get the kind of information that they need when it comes to being able to identify and communicate effectively with this population specifically.

Donelan

03:37

Thank you. Travis, as far as taking a community policing approach to this issue, how does that look in the work you are doing in your state or local community?

Akins

03:46

So, of course, we're very proud of the work that we've been able to accomplish together alongside our public safety agencies and we're very humbled by the fact that we offer one of the nation's best community policing and public relations programs.

It's truly through our mutually beneficial 16-week GTO Cadet Training Program where we offer one heck of a unique experience to individuals with varying disabilities, whether it be autism, Cerebral Palsy, Down Syndrome, ACC, childhood cancers, traumatic brain injury, and we offer an experience of a lifetime where they can wear a uniform and go through our vocational training program alongside your local public safety agencies, alongside your local heroes, your local first responders to gain valuable job,

life, and social skills that launches them and propels them forward in life that—where they can learn to succeed no matter what and overcome life's challenges and life's obstacles despite their disabilities.

One of the things that we're also most proud about is, at the end of our GTO Cadet Program, we work very diligently to secure paid jobs for each and every single GTO cadet with a disability in the community. We're extremely proud of that.

Donelan

05:02

Travis, staying with you. What are some cutting-edge forward, thinking strategies that police departments can begin to think about to creatively address this issue, and what should be the first step?

Akins

05:14

So one of the most important pieces of policy and practices in my personal and professional opinion is relationship-building. If we're going to be sincere in our efforts, to acknowledge the fact that, historically, a lot of individuals with disabilities are maybe not always treated equally or fairly by law enforcement due to misperceptions, the various misperceptions and the lack of training, lack of empathy or first-hand positive experiences and exposures that occur all across this nation.

You know, one of the most heartbreaking facts that has always stayed with me as a law enforcement officer of many years was that thousands of families still do not feel comfortable calling 911 and interacting with law enforcement during a crisis situation. This crisis situation, as we all know, is when they need the police more than ever before, and, quite simply, it's because there's a lack of trust, that most officers are uneducated and/or trained in those specific situations involving a loved one with a specific intellectual developmental disability.

Law enforcement truly has the ability and the autonomy to be able to reverse all of these negative thoughts and future negative encounters by building strong, transparent, and everlasting relationship with those individuals and their families with intellectual developmental disabilities.

The GTO Cadet Program offers exactly that. It offers a highly unique opportunity of a lifetime for a person with a disability to wear a uniform and learn firsthand what it's like to be a law enforcement officer and work inside of a police department or a sheriff's office or a court house and even a fire station while, simultaneously, law enforcement and first responders are afforded the unique opportunity to truly get to know these individuals as individuals, as human beings who have the ability when given the opportunity to be productive citizens of our community.

GTO also offers pre- and post-perception assessment surveys with our cadets and their families, as well as with the law enforcement agencies that participate with us. The results prove and aggressively prove that barriers and misperceptions are broken down through personal relationship-building.

Donelan

07:28

Leigh Ann, what do you think should be the first step?

Davis

07:31

Travis is right on target here. I think that establishing those relationships between people with disabilities and law enforcement officers is so crucial. In the past five years, here at The Arc's National Center on Criminal Justice & Disabilities, we've been working towards creating what's called Pathways to Justice. And this is a training that works with the community to address issues that come up when law enforcement has some kind of interaction with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

So, as Travis was talking about, we've seen these interactions increasing in our communities and often officers don't have the tools that they need to address it. So, Pathways to Justice offers a two-step strategy and is more than just training alone. It is a comprehensive community-based approach that builds relationships between the criminal justice and disability communities and also works to ensure equal access to justice for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

The first step of Pathways is to create what's called a Disability Response Team, and that includes a law enforcement officer, a victim service provider, and a legal services professional which could be an attorney or a judge. And it also includes a person with an intellectual disability and a disability advocate whose role is to be the lead organizer and facilitator of the training effort.

Now, this multidisciplinary team works with the lead trainers to help make training site-specific, and it also identifies systemic barriers to justice as well as serves as the go-to resource when criminal justice and disability issues arise in their community.

The second step, after that Disability Response Team has formed is for staff from our National Center on Criminal Justice & Disability to work with the team members to provide a full-day, in-person training that covers topics such as how to identify, accommodate and then interact with people with intellectual disabilities.

So, there's modules for law enforcement, legal and victim service professionals that highlight profession-specific issues that can come up when interacting with someone with disabilities.

We piloted the training in 2016 in five different sites across the country, and then we gave six additional trainings in 2017. And more recently we held our first trainer version of Pathways in Ohio this year. And to date, we've created Disability Response Teams in more than a dozen sites across the country and have trained over 5,000 professionals, advocates and people with disabilities on these issues.

And, you know, we're really seeing some promising results from the training that's encouraging. Ah, for example, we held a training in Virginia where the Sheriff's Department ended up wanting to create a policy on how to best interact with people with intellectual and development disabilities. So, one way that we're trying to measure our success is by looking at what the Disability Response Teams are coming

up with in terms of how they want to address these issues. And then we're following up with them three, six, nine months out, to see what they've been able to accomplish.

Donelan

10:52

Leigh Ann, what is the most important piece of a promising practice and how are these practices or strategies being measured in yours and as well as other efforts to educate police about people with disabilities? In other words, how do we know what works?

Davis

11:07

That's an excellent question and one that, as I've been working in this field for over 20 years, I come back to over and over again. And I think it's something we all need to be asking, especially within the world of criminal justice. Because we want to create policies and programs that we know are working well for both officers and people with disabilities. So, one of the things I'm really excited about is looking at applying the tenets of procedural justice to people with intellectual disability.

So, basically procedural justice is a law enforcement practice that refers to the idea that treating people fairly makes a real impact on how society views law enforcement and can help legitimize policing and create better relationships between officers and citizens. And the four pillars of procedural justice include first, number one, being fair in processes or interactions. Secondly, being transparent in actions. Third, providing opportunity for people to have a voice in the process. And then fourth, being impartial in decision making.

So, ideally, given these pillars, procedural justice could help shift the mindset of officers into focusing more on using de-escalation techniques once a disability is discovered. And there's research going on right now in the field of mental health, by Dr. Amy Watson, who's looking at how she can apply the tenets of procedural justice and how that can improve police response to people with different types of mental health conditions. And what we're wanting to do is apply that same concept to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Donelan

12:52

Travis, I'll ask you. How do we know what works?

Akins

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That's a great question, and, and specific to our Growth Through Opportunity Program, we're very proud to share with you that we have a 100% graduation rate and a 90% job placement rate for our GTO cadets upon graduation from our 16-week vocational training program. We've seen it work. We know

it's effective, and it's unforgettable what the officers are now being able to do alongside the individuals with varying intellectual and developmental disabilities after earning that mutual respect from one another.

Donelan

13:28

Travis, how can our listeners find out more about your work?

Akins

13:33

Sure. Listeners can find out about our work through our website, which www.gtocadets.org. That's spelled G-T-O-C-A-D-E-T-S-dot-org. We also have a Facebook page, GTO Cadets, as well as a recent impact video that's now placed on YouTube.

I would strongly encourage anyone listening to this podcast to contact me or my team through our website, which is www.gtocadets.org, spelled G-T-O-C-A-D-E-T-S-dot-org, or through our Facebook page, and follow us on Twitter and Facebook, @gtocadets.

We look forward to hearing from you and speaking with lots of different people throughout our country and, hopefully, partnering with you to enhance your community and to be in a more inclusive community with enhanced public relations specific to individuals with varying intellectual and developmental disabilities. Thank you.

Donelan

14:33

Leigh Ann, how can our listeners find out more about your programs?

Davis

14:37

Leigh Ann Davis: To learn more about The Arc's National Center on Criminal Justice & Disability and our Pathways to Justice training, we have a website that the listeners can check out. The NCCJD website is www.thearc.org/nccjd. So that's W-W-W-dot-T-H-E-A-R-C-dot-O-R-G-forward slash-N-C-C-J-D. And we also have a website specific to Pathways to Justice training that can be found at this website, it's N-C-C-J-D-pathwaystojustice-dot-O-R-G.

So, we're very excited to share all of these resources with your listeners. And law enforcement and others interested in learning more can contact us with any kind of question, from a simple information and referral question to requesting technical assistance, or just learning more about Pathways to Justice as well. And they can contact us through email at nccjinfo@thearc.org. And I'll spell that out too. It's N-C-C-J-D-I-N-F-O-at-T-H-E-A-R-C-dot-O-R-G.

Donelan

16:04

I would like to sincerely thank the both of you for joining us. This is *The Beat*.

Voiceover: *The Beat* Exit

16:08

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Voiceover: Disclaimer

17:07

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