

A Practical Overview of De-Escalation Skills in Law Enforcement: Helping Individuals in Crisis While Reducing Police Liability and Injury

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Basic de-escalation skills training, such as that included in the Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training curriculum, is a law enforcement training experience designed to equip police officers with knowledge and skills that enable them to initiate specific actions to de-escalate a crisis situation. This type of training involves the acquisition of effective communication and active listening skills, as well as other de-escalation techniques, in addition to role-playing, which involves the demonstration of and practice using the desired skills. De-escalation techniques can be an effective intervention tool that not only helps individuals who are in crisis but also reduces police liability and injury. When an officer applies de-escalation skills appropriately, the probability that he or she will effectively intervene in a crisis is increased and the need for using physical force is minimized.

KEYWORDS *Crisis Intervention Team, de-escalation, law enforcement, police*

INTRODUCTION

One of the enduring myths about policing involves the idea that police officers are primarily crime fighters. Yet, less than one third of a patrol officer's activities are actually devoted to law enforcement; the majority of his or her duties are focused on service activities, maintaining peace and order, and problem-solving (Walker & Katz, 2008). The public generally contacts the

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police when all other options have failed, and the police are often requested to perform tasks that others are unwilling to carry out. The public considers law enforcement as a general-purpose emergency service that provides 24-hour police availability for addressing problems that arise. Many police calls for service do not necessarily require the response of a sworn police officer with arrest power; however, they often require someone with professional expertise. Despite their limited formal training in family problems, mental illnesses, or alcohol and drug abuse, police are frequently expected to address a vast range of situations (Castellano-Hoyt, 2003; Goldstein, Monti, Sardino, & Green, 1979; Thomas & Hendricks, 1991; Walker & Katz, 2008).

According to Miller and Braswell (1983), “crisis intervention calls represent the most frequent requests for police services” (p. 27). For the criminal justice worker, the term *crisis* would most likely refer to a situation in which an individual is having extreme difficulty coping with a personal problem, event, or interpersonal situation (Romano, 1990). It is considered a crucial or decisive point in one’s life that can be emotionally stressful and traumatizing (Everly & Mitchel, 1997). As the role of police officers continues to expand from exclusively crime fighting to encompass other service-oriented functions, they must be able to recognize the characteristics of individuals in crisis in order to provide an effective and helpful resolution to the situation while reducing liability and risk of injury.

While the causes can vary greatly, anyone can be susceptible to experiencing a crisis. Individuals with serious mental illnesses like psychotic disorders (e.g., schizophrenia) who are in crisis may have trouble with reality testing, experiencing delusions (fixed false beliefs) or hallucinations (a misperception commonly experienced as hearing voices). These individuals may also be experiencing fear, insecurity, difficulty concentrating, agitation, over-stimulation, and poor judgment. They may become preoccupied, withdrawn, or argumentative. Other crisis events may involve family altercations, intoxicated or chemically dependent individuals, suicide attempts, victims of accidents, physical or sexual assaults, or other taxing situations (Goldstein et al., 1979).

The primary objective of the police when responding to crisis intervention calls is to restore and preserve peace and the safety of all individuals involved in the disturbance, while protecting the community. Oftentimes, however, the officer must enter into a crisis situation about which he or she has little or no knowledge (Miller & Braswell, 2002). The manner in which the officer responds to the situation is critical in determining whether it will end peacefully or as an even further escalated situation. More officers are assaulted while responding to family disturbance calls than any other single type of police call (Hendricks & Thomas, 1990; Miller & Braswell, 2002). When a police officer responds to a crisis involving a person with a serious mental illness who is not receiving treatment, the safety of both the person in crisis and the responding officer may be compromised, particularly when

the officer has received little or no training about mental illnesses and crisis intervention (Miller & Braswell, 2002; Oliva, Haynes, Covington, Lushbaugh, & Compton, 2007).

Numerous cities and states throughout the country have implemented law enforcement training programs that provide classroom instruction and performance-based training to prepare their officers to safely and effectively respond to situations involving persons in crisis. Considered the prototype of law enforcement–mental health collaborations, the Memphis model of the Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) program provides self-selected officers (often volunteer officers who have been selected by a review process) with 40 hr of classroom and experiential training in de-escalation and managing crises (Addy & James, 2005; Cochran, Deane, & Borum, 2000; Compton, Bahora, Watson, & Oliva, 2008). Modeled after the original Memphis CIT model, CIT training programs in numerous cities and counties in many states provide 5 consecutive days of training that comprise both classroom and practical law enforcement training (Oliva et al., 2007). The curriculum typically includes classroom instruction pertaining to various mental illnesses, developmental disabilities, and addictive diseases; site visits to local emergency receiving facilities and inpatient psychiatric units; and performance-based training, which includes the mastery of de-escalation techniques and crisis intervention skills through role-play scenarios (Oliva & Compton, 2008; Oliva et al., 2007; Vickers, 2000). The scenarios, developed from actual incidents, are used to illustrate crisis de-escalation principles. Intensive feedback from fellow officers and mental health professionals are provided to ensure mastery of the skills (Dupont & Cochran, 2000).

When responding to requests for assistance involving persons in crisis, police officers must possess the skills necessary to safely and effectively intervene during crisis situations; that is, “because police officers deal primarily with people who have problems, they must try to develop and utilize observation and communication skills in order to perform their job effectively and efficiently” (Miller & Braswell, 1983, p. 73). Police training that focuses specifically on de-escalation skills is described in the following sections. This training model is based on the premises of the Memphis CIT model and other recognized CIT training programs, and is generally used during 40-hr CIT training programs or train-the-trainer courses. These procedures are designed to equip officers with skills that will assist them in managing crisis situations in a professional, effective, and flexible manner (Goldstein et al., 1979).

BASIC DE-ESCALATION SKILLS

When an officer arrives on the scene of a crisis event, which may involve a person with a serious mental illness, his or her first priority is to secure

the scene and ensure the safety of all persons involved. Officer and public safety is a paramount concern (Castellano-Hoyt, 2003). Because of the unpredictable nature of a person in crisis, proper officer-safety techniques should be maintained throughout the incident. Once the scene is secure, officers can initiate specific actions to ensure that further crises do not arise and the current situation de-escalates. Removing any distractions or disruptive persons from the area so that the officer can maintain focus on the individual experiencing the crisis is an important component of de-escalation. The officer should remain calm and speak slowly, in short sentences, to encourage communication. The responding officer should also present a genuine willingness to understand and help. Obtaining pertinent information from family members, friends, or witnesses can also assist the officer in effectively resolving the crisis situation.

The term *de-escalation* generally refers to the act of moving from a state of high tension to a state of reduced tension (Richards, 2007). In law enforcement, minimizing danger and tension in potentially volatile situations is a daily responsibility. Police officers generally already possess many of the skills and tools necessary to control these types of situations. Importantly, many officers do not have a complete understanding of the dynamics of these situations or the precursors of a crisis event. When officers are properly trained to recognize these events, they can utilize effective crisis intervention techniques in addition to the skills they already possess to safely intervene during the crisis event.

When police officers de-escalate a crisis, they conduct an intervention that will assist the individual in crisis in regaining control emotionally and resolve or reduce the crisis to a manageable state. This response is similar to other law enforcement strategies that require communication and negotiation skills, knowledge, tactics, and officer-safety techniques. However, officer safety is paramount, and an officer should never jeopardize his or her safety, regardless of the nature of the situation. Police officers may respond to calls for service using one or more intervention techniques generally prescribed in their agency's use-of-force policies. The National Institute of Justice (2009) provides a description of a use-of-force continuum as follows:

1. Officer Presence: Many times the presence of a police officer is sufficient to deter crime or diffuse a situation. The officer's attitude is professional and nonthreatening. Individuals recognize the authority of the officer, and his or her mere presence during the situation is enough to gain the cooperation of those involved.
2. Verbalization (Force Is Not Physical): An officer may issue calm, nonthreatening commands to ensure compliance of an individual. The officer may increase his or her volume of voice or issue very specific, short commands in an attempt to gain compliance.

3. Empty-Hand Control: An officer may be compelled to use bodily force to gain control of a situation. The *soft technique* may be used by an officer to gain control over an individual who becomes abusive or resistant to verbal commands. This type of action generally includes grabbing, holding, and joint locks to restrain the individual. The *hard technique* refers to physically engaging an individual. This type of action includes hitting, kicking, or other physical actions necessary to restrain the individual.
4. Less-Than-Lethal Methods of Physical Force: When hard hands are not sufficient, an officer may utilize nonlethal technologies to gain control of a situation. *Blunt impact methods* involve the officer's use of a baton or projectile to immobilize a combative person. *Chemical methods* involve the officer's use of chemical sprays or projectiles embedded with chemicals (e.g., pepper spray) to restrain an individual. *Conducted energy devices* (e.g., the taser) discharge a high-voltage, low-amperage jolt of electricity at a distance, representing another method that an officer may use to immobilize an individual.
5. Lethal Force: When an individual poses a serious threat to an officer or another individual, the officer is generally authorized by law to use lethal weapons (i.e., firearms) to protect himself or herself or others by stopping the individual's actions.

The typical police officer almost never discharges his service weapon in the line of duty during his or her career, and much of an officer's time is expended in maintaining social control. Although lethal weapons are very infrequently used, lower levels of force are employed relatively routinely. When an officer possesses certain personality traits or characteristics, the probability that he or she will effectively intervene in a crisis is increased and the need for some type of physical force diminishes. These officers are assertive and precise; considered team-players, who have exceptional listening skills and demonstrate empathy; able to utilize effective problem-solving skills; and characterized by the capacity to stay calm and remain in control (Richards, 2007; Vickers, 2000). One of the most crucial skills that an officer can possess when de-escalating a crisis is his or her ability to effectively communicate with others. An effective communicator is willing to listen to another individual and communicate that he or she is receiving and understanding what is being communicated.

Effective Communication

The task of crisis intervention is that of communicating with people (Romano, 1990). The purpose of crisis intervention is to help individuals in crisis achieve—with the assistance of the crisis intervener—equilibrium within themselves so they can resume their normal activities (Romano, 1990).

Effective communication involves the “passing” or transmission of information from one person to another in a way that is mutually understood, and results in the recipient of the information behaving in a manner that demonstrates understanding (Georgia Crisis Intervention Team [CIT] Program, 2006). It is essential to successful management of a crisis event and allows the intervening officer to gain valuable information regarding the problem. It also enables the officer and the individual in crisis to understand one another, thus reducing tension (Police Executive Research Forum, 1997). To effectively intervene during a crisis, an officer must be prepared to dedicate the proper amount of time necessary to de-escalate the crisis and not be rushed (Richards, 2007).

ACTIVE LISTENING SKILLS

Active listening skills are an essential tool when de-escalating a crisis situation, such as one involving a person with a serious mental illness. When an officer engages in active listening, he or she is listening for the total meaning of the words spoken by the individual in crisis. The officer attempts to focus on the actual meaning of the words spoken rather than becoming distracted by the individual’s delusions, hallucinations, or other psychiatric symptoms that may be present. The officer should provide reflecting statements—i.e., “I understand that makes you angry”—to indicate that he or she is listening. The techniques of active listening allow the officer to convey that he or she wants to understand the individual’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The officer should be sincere and genuine so the individual in crisis is aware that the officer is supportive and attempting to lend assistance (Richards, 2007).

Officers who utilize active listening skills incorporate the use of *minimal encouragers*, which are brief responses that acknowledge the officer’s attentiveness and that he or she is listening. For these responses to be effective, the officer must be sincere. They are best used at times when individuals who are in crisis are talking and attempting to express themselves. Examples of minimal encouragers are: “Uh-huh” and “Okay” (Richards, 2007). Officers may also utilize the following active listening techniques: (a) introducing oneself, (b) using “I” statements, (c) restating statements, (d) mirroring/reflecting, and (e) summarizing/paraphrasing. These techniques, taught in various CIT and related law enforcement training programs (Georgia CIT Program, 2006), are described below.

Introducing oneself. Introductions can be an effective tool for promoting communication and establishing a relationship between the individual in crisis and the intervening officer. When an officer introduces himself or herself, he or she should be prepared to explain the reason for being there. An example of a good officer introduction is: “Good morning. I’m Officer Smith with the Johnston Police Department, and I was called out to see how we can help. What’s your name?”

Using "I" statements. These types of statements communicate to the individual in crisis that the officer is aware of the individual's problem or the crisis issues and reflect the sincerity of the officer. These statements convey that the officer is listening to the individual and understanding him or her, and that the officer genuinely cares. Some examples of "I" statements commonly used by officers are: "I can see that you are upset [or angry]," "I hear in your voice that you are worried," "I'm here to help you," "I want to help you," "I will keep you safe," "I care . . . I have time . . . I'm listening," and "I appreciate your help and cooperation."

Restating statements. When restating statements, the officer acknowledges that he or she is listening and understanding, and also encourages the individual in crisis to provide further details. This technique consists of stating back to the individual—in words somewhat different from the individual's own words—the essence of that information (Goldstein et al., 1979). For example, the individual in crisis might say, "I don't know what I'm going to do; my family doesn't want me here," to which the officer responds, "You're not sure where you can stay for a while, but home doesn't seem like the best place right now."

Mirroring/Reflecting statements. Mirroring/reflecting expresses to the individual an understanding of his or her main feelings (Goldstein et al., 1979). These types of statements are commonly used to facilitate communication with an individual and are accomplished by repeating the last few words of the individual's last statement. For example, the individual in crisis might say, "I'm tired of no one listening to me, and it makes me angry," to which the officer responds, "It makes you angry."

Summarizing/Paraphrasing statements. Summarizing statements are similar to restating statements because they both may be used by an officer to paraphrase the information conveyed. However, they can differ regarding the time at which they are utilized by the intervening officer. Restating statements are frequently used early in the communication process to communicate the officer's desire to understand the individual's situation. Summarizing statements are often used to recap or summarize the information already received from the individual by restating the information in the officer's own words. These statements should include the main points of the previous content. For example, the officer might say, "Okay, so what you have told me is that [restating the information], and you feel [identify the emotion]. Do I understand you correctly?"

OPEN-ENDED/CLOSED-ENDED QUESTIONS

When de-escalating a crisis, the intervening officer may pose certain questions to solicit additional information or a commitment from the individual in crisis. The officer may ask open-ended questions intended to solicit additional information from the individual when necessary. At other times,

the officer may ask closed-ended questions for a “yes” or “no” response from the individual when the officer is seeking agreement.

Open-ended questions. These types of questions are not designed to be answered with merely a “yes” or “no,” but allow an individual the freedom and opportunity to provide an answer of considerable length, formulated primarily by that individual rather than the officer (Goldstein et al., 1979). Open-ended questions assist the officer in obtaining information and determining whether the individual is in touch with reality. For example, the officer might say, “Tell me more about . . .,” “What else?,” or “What other things are going on?”

Closed-ended questions. These types of questions can be answered with a “yes” or “no,” or with brief, factual replies (Goldstein et al., 1979). They may help the officer to obtain a commitment. These questions can also aid the officer in acquiring specific information. The officer should begin with the question, “Are you . . .,” “Do you . . .,” or “Will you . . .” Examples of closed-ended questions are: “Are you thinking of hurting yourself?” and “Will you let me take you to get some help?”

By utilizing his or her active listening skills, the officer responding to a crisis situation is better able to control the environment, be physically and mentally attentive, and listen for meaning in the words said to him or her by the individual in crisis. Active listening allows the officer to establish an empathic connection with the person in crisis and ultimately resolve the situation in a safe and effective manner.

Behaviors to Avoid

When de-escalating crises, certain behaviors should be avoided. “Why” questions generally should not be used because they may cause the individual in crisis to feel overly pressed and become defensive. The officer de-escalating the crisis should also avoid speaking too loudly, which may cause further anxiety and agitation. The officer should never rush, allowing as much time as necessary to safely and successfully resolve the situation (Georgia CIT Program, 2006).

Intervening officers should try not to allow their feelings to interfere with their professionalism and should always focus on the behaviors of the individual in crisis. The officers should be courteous and use words/phrases such as “please” and “thank you.” Officers should never take the individual’s words or actions personally and should always remember that he or she is in crisis. Officers should never make promises that they cannot fulfill. Most importantly, intervening officers should never fail to maintain safety (Georgia CIT Program, 2006).

The individual in crisis has the right to feel or say whatever he or she wishes to feel or say. An officer may choose to acknowledge that an individual’s delusions or hallucinations are real to that individual, but the officer

should not challenge or deny the individual's delusional or hallucinatory statements. As well, the officer should never "buy into the delusions" by stating or implying that the officer believes them to be based in reality, which would be dishonest (Georgia CIT Program, 2006).

Role-Playing

Based on the precepts of the Memphis CIT training model, role-playing has become a recognized teaching technique in de-escalation skills training for law enforcement officers. Role-playing can be an instrumental learning method that assists police officers in mastering the various verbal de-escalation techniques. Officers participating in these types of exercises are usually initially uncomfortable when role-playing, but should be reminded that it is a learning experience. The role-play scenarios are derived from real-life experiences. The feedback is meant to be constructive, not disparaging. It is emphasized at the beginning of the role-playing that these skills are intended to supplement an officer's existing skill set, not replace it. While de-escalation skills are effective in some situations, an officer must always maintain safety and utilize reasonable force, executing arrests when necessary (Georgia CIT Program, 2005).

The primary responsibilities of the facilitator in the role-play scenarios include identification of: (a) an appropriate scenario that will demonstrate the skills to be achieved, (b) role-players to assist in executing the scenario effectively, (c) officers to participate in the scenario, and (d) the desired outcome of the scenario. The facilitator is responsible for introducing a description of the context of the scenario, providing no more information than an officer would normally receive when responding to a call. During the scenario, the facilitator will evaluate the participating officer to ensure that he or she is achieving the desired outcome goals. Finally, the facilitator is responsible for providing both constructive and positive feedback at the completion of the scenario (Georgia CIT Program, 2005).

Role-play scenarios are designed to provide the officer with an opportunity to utilize and practice de-escalation techniques. The officer should not feel that his or her only option to resolve the situation is to use force. Should an officer elect to use force to resolve the situation, the scenario is discontinued, and the officer's choices in managing the situation should be constructively analyzed and re-directed when appropriate (Georgia CIT Program, 2005).

LEVELS OF CRISIS

The complexity of a role-play scenario is determined by the number and nature of issues the officer will encounter. Scenarios are categorized into three levels: basic, moderate, and complex based on a number of variables. Such factors include the number of individuals in crisis, the number of officers

(both primary and backup) responding to the crisis event, the number of additional persons involved in the scenario (e.g., family members, bystanders, and crowds), the physical setting, the intensity of the crisis that the individual is experiencing, the level of escalation of the scenario, and the number and complexity of the outcome goals (Georgia CIT Program, 2005).

Basic scenarios. A basic scenario is generally comprised of: one or two officers, one individual in crisis, minimal escalation of the individual in crisis, and a single and uncomplicated outcome goal. Officers participating in the role-playing should initially engage in a basic scenario and a simple goal in order to achieve a basic foundation and understanding of de-escalation. A simple goal could include the demonstration of one or two of the de-escalation techniques, i.e., an introduction and “I” statements. This particular exercise allows the officer to successfully demonstrate the necessary skills, achieve a simple goal, and gain confidence in utilizing the de-escalation skills (Georgia CIT Program, 2005). An illustration of a basic scenario is as follows:

Officers receive a dispatch call about a Caucasian male subject at the local probation office who is in the office lobby in a very agitated state. He is yelling at the secretary because he wants to see his probation officer who is not at the office. The secretary is requesting assistance from the police.

Moderate scenarios. As the officer gains confidence and experience using de-escalation skills, additional variables can be added to increase the complexity of the scenario and therefore, the complexity of the outcome goal. Rather than simply demonstrating one or two techniques, the officer would be expected to demonstrate the appropriate skills necessary to achieve a desirable outcome (Georgia CIT Program, 2005). An illustration of a moderate scenario is as follows:

Officer assistance is requested in reference to an upset and distraught inmate who is sitting in the corner of his cell and beating the corner with a pillow. The inmate is stating, “not me, not me” repeatedly. One officer who has not received any de-escalation skills training is already located at the scene when the responding officer arrives. The responding officer notes that the untrained officer wants to jump on the inmate and “take him down” so that the officer can physically restrain the inmate.

Complex scenarios. The role player portraying the individual in crisis can escalate and de-escalate his or her behavior, depending on the actions of the officer. The complexity of a scenario can also be increased by introducing other variables. To accomplish this, officer-safety variables can be manipulated; role players portraying family members or relatives can be added; the involvement of a “crowd” of role players can be included; the behavior of other officers who have not been trained in de-escalation techniques can

be inserted into the scenario; or variation in possible outcome goals can be used (Georgia CIT Program, 2005).

To modify the first scenario given above to increase its complexity, the facilitator could change the outcome goal to include removal of the subject from the lobby of the probation office. An additional factor contributing to the scenario's complexity might include the interjection of other probationers waiting in the lobby. Increasing the level to which the subject escalates or the reaction of the secretary when the officers arrive at the scene could also increase the complexity of the scenario (Georgia CIT Program, 2005). An illustration of a complex scenario is as follows:

The officer is dispatched to a call involving a female who is walking down the middle of a busy street. The caller of the initial complaint stated that the female was ranting and yelling at vehicles while tearing at her clothing. The officer arrives and observes the woman in the street yelling that the "devil" is in her shirt. She is attempting to remove her shirt by pulling at it. Traffic has ceased to move, so people are angry and have begun honking their horns and yelling out their windows. Pedestrians on the sidewalk have also stopped to stare.

Several factors should be considered when evaluating the performance of an officer during a role-play scenario. The officer should be evaluated in terms of his or her use of the appropriate de-escalation techniques, including an introduction, use of "I" statements, restating, mirroring and reflecting, and summarizing. An officer should not be expected to acquire all of these skills immediately, but as he or she gains experience and confidence, he or she should be able to demonstrate each of the skills more adeptly. The quality of the officer's interaction with other individuals in the scenario should also be evaluated. Questions that include, "Did the officer effectively utilize individuals such as family members to maximize the amount of information obtained about the situation?" should be addressed (Georgia CIT Program, 2005).

Officer-safety skills should never be compromised, even when role-playing. Therefore, the officer should additionally be evaluated concerning his or her ability to maintain officer safety while effectively de-escalating the situation. Finally, the officer should be evaluated regarding his or her effectiveness in successfully resolving the situation and reaching a goal that is both satisfactory to the officer and to the individual in crisis (Georgia CIT Program, 2005).

EXPERT REVIEW PANEL

In accordance with the principles of the Memphis CIT model, the implementation of a review panel can be a useful assessment tool in effectively evaluating an officer's performance during role-playing. The purpose of the panel is to provide positive and constructive feedback to officers during the

role-play scenarios. The panel should be comprised of officers who have received training in crisis intervention techniques and understand the need for other officers to master proper de-escalation skills to avoid the use of unnecessary physical force. By utilizing an expert panel, the trained officers and facilitator conducting the role-play scenarios are able to maintain their focus on ensuring that each scenario results in a successful resolution while allowing participating officers to properly demonstrate their understanding of the desired de-escalation skills (Georgia CIT Program, 2005).

The expert panel focuses on the participating officer's ability to maintain officer safety while using proper de-escalation skills. Because these officers are not participating in the role-playing, they are less distracted and therefore able to provide more comprehensive feedback. Generally, the expert panel is comprised of three members. Each member of the panel is responsible for focusing on one particular aspect of the role-play scenario. Specifically, one member is tasked with evaluating an officer's use of the specified de-escalation skills, another assesses the officer's ability to properly maintain officer safety, and another evaluates other aspects of performance including the officer's ability to use additional resources, the tone of the officer's voice, etc. (Georgia CIT Program, 2005).

Training Objectives

Upon completion of de-escalation skills training, police officers should be able to demonstrate certain competencies. The officer interacting in a scenario involving a person with a mental illness who is in crisis should be able to secure a scene that involves an individual who presents a potential risk both to himself or herself and to others, including the officer. The officer should then be able to de-escalate the situation utilizing crisis intervention techniques, thereby minimizing the risk of injury to all involved. The officer should also be able to effectively assist the individual in voluntarily seeking the appropriate assistance needed to effectively resolve the crisis. Officers who successfully complete de-escalation training, such as that provided in the 40-hr CIT curriculum, are able to: (a) explain the dynamics of a crisis event, (b) utilize appropriate active listening techniques, (c) differentiate between open-ended and closed-ended questions, and (d) identify behaviors that should be avoided when attempting to de-escalate a crisis situation (Georgia CIT Program, 2005).

CONCLUSIONS

Today, crisis intervention training is standard procedure in many police departments. This training facilitates officers' understanding of an individual in a time of crisis and therefore equips them with the knowledge and skills necessary to gain the cooperation of that person. Thus, crisis intervention

is a benefit to law enforcement and a valuable tool in reducing injuries and casualties in crisis situations (Thomas & Hendricks, 1991). Since the implementation of the Memphis CIT program, the Memphis Police Department has reported a dramatic decrease in subject and police injuries since 1988. They have also reported highly beneficial results that include: (a) reduced stigma and perceptions of dangerousness toward mental illnesses, (b) increased involvement of officers on calls related to persons with mental illnesses, (c) reduced use of deadly force, (d) reduced use of restraints, (e) fewer injuries to officers and citizens, (f) greater flexibility in the use of misdemeanor charges, (g) lower arrest rates, (h) a decline in the number of persons with serious mental illnesses sent to jail, and (i) relief to an overburdened criminal justice system (Vickers, 2000).

Because the police are the first responders to problems that occur in the community (Breci, 1991), the knowledge and skills that these officers possess are critical to decisions they will make concerning their responses to societal problems, crises, emergencies, etc. Equipping police officers with the proper de-escalation skills affords them additional tools for helping individuals in crisis, thus reducing the number of injuries to officers and citizens and minimizing the number of police law suits. It should be reiterated that effectively intervening during a crisis requires that officers are able to dedicate the proper amount of time necessary to de-escalate the situation.

Over the past decade, police training methods have been improved to assist law enforcement personnel in dealing more effectively and efficiently with crisis events. However, more police-recruit schools, training programs, and colleges should offer courses that afford students the opportunity to understand and manage crisis situations and hone interpersonal skills (Martin, 1980). In addition to more specialized police training in crisis intervention and de-escalation skills, further research is needed to explore the nature of responses to crisis events by officers who have received crisis intervention techniques.

Although this article has focused on providing a practical overview of de-escalation skills and the training of such techniques in law enforcement settings, it should be noted that further knowledge and skills are necessary *after* the crisis event has been de-escalated. Those actions, though beyond the purview of this article, include providing the individual or family members with resources or referral information, as well as transporting the individual, especially if a serious mental illness appears to be present and there is a risk of harm or the person is unable to care for himself/herself, to an emergency receiving facility for an evaluation by a mental health professional.

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