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N.J. honors police officer who died trying to rescue suspect

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Early September, Sean Peek jumped into a river.

The Bridgeton officer was trying to rescue a woman suspected of burglary. But his equipment weighed him down, and he died hours after being pulled from the water.

On Friday, he was honored with the state's first Detective Joseph Seals Valor Award, named after the Jersey City officer killed a year ago.

Officials announced a total of eight "Excellence in Policing" awards during a virtual ceremony, highlighting cops and prosecutors who created youth programs, helped colleagues deal with stress and expanded community outreach.

"These are unprecedented and challenging times in which to serve," Gov. Phil Murphy said at the beginning of the ceremony. "These awardees represent the very best of the law enforcement profession."

Five Bridgeton officers shared memories of Peek, mentioning his love for his daughter, his mentorship of new officers and how caring he was when interviewing children who were victims of crime.

"He was the embodiment of what the oath of this office is," Patrolman Ronald Broomall said.

Each award was announced by state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal, who said the accolades were part of sweeping policing reforms launched a year ago.

The winners showed "dedication, ingenuity and commitment" that both improved policing and "built community trust," Grewal said.

Long Branch Sgt. Antonia Gonzalez won the Detective Pablo Santiago Resiliency Award, named after a Mercer County sheriff's officer who died by suicide.

After attending a suicide prevention conference, Gonzalez created a dedicated break room at her department for officers to decompress.

"I'm proud of all of us," she said. "It has to be everybody coming together to make it work."

The Essex County Prosecutor's Office received the Attorney General's 21/21 Award. The award's name refers to community meetings prosecutors attend in all 21 counties to build local relationships.

The office has several youth programs, officials said, including five-week high school internships and conferences for both middle and high school students.

The state parole board received the Attorney General's Initiative Award, for their work combating opioid addiction.

A grant allowed the board to connect parolees with recovery coaches who are available 24/7, according to David Wolfsgruber, assistant director of the board's community programs division. Those services have helped reduce overdoses and lowered the number of people returned to prison, Wolfsgruber said.

The Innovations in Public Safety Award went to the Cumberland County Prosecutor's Office, which created the "Coping with COVID" video series to help residents endure with the pandemic, connect victims with state services and warn people about scams.

"We want the community to know that we're not only there to prosecute crimes, we're also there to help," county prosecutor Jennifer Webb-McRae said.

Officials gave the Outstanding Community Partnership Award to the Collingswood Police Department. Collingswood has a new advisory committee to educate residents about the department and help cops better understand what residents want, Chief Kevin Carey said. It will also help build a more diverse department, he said.

Det. Anthony Carrington III, with the Ocean County Prosecutor's Office, won the Outstanding Youth Engagement Award. A basketball clinic he helps run had formed inroads with local kids, and improved how they viewed law enforcement, he said.

Terrence Porter, pastor of Pilgrim Baptist Church in Red Bank, was named Police Chaplain of the Year for his work with the Monmouth County Chief's Association.