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N.J. police are being retrained on how to handle crises. Here's what they'll be taught.

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You can hear the cop's breathing speed up.

Last year in February, Camden County police struggled to push a handcuffed suspect into the back of an SUV. While fighting the arrest, the man called one officer a series of unprintable names.

The door finally shut. Then body camera footage showed that cop turn back, yank open the door and dive for the man.

When this video was recently screened in a Rutgers classroom for about three dozen New Jersey officers, one of them audibly said, "Oh no."

But the incident's peaceful end, and the promise it offers for police in similar confrontations, is partly why the state is betting big on two new training programs for tens of thousands of cops.

New Jersey is the first state to require that every officer take a de-escalation course created by the Police Executive Research Forum, a Washington, D.C.-based research and policy organization, and a class on how to stop colleagues from making grievous mistakes co-developed by Georgetown University.

Other departments nationwide are also mandating training overhauls in the wake of George Floyd's murder.

During three days in July, NJ Advance Media observed both programs for about 15 hours.

The training doesn't fundamentally reimagine police work. Cops weren't told to keep guns holstered or to act like social workers.

But the trainers do want police to rethink how they approach both residents and colleagues in crisis, and proponents believe these changes can simultaneously reduce misconduct, increase cops' safety and lower crime.

Last month's classes, which took place in Tillett Hall in Piscataway, were for the men and women who will eventually teach the same material to the rest of the state's more than 38,000 officers.

How well the programs are adopted will soon be on them.

“I’m not naive, there’s a few of you here who say, ‘I’m not fully bought in yet,’” Assistant Attorney General Joseph Walsh told one group. “Just have an open mind.”

‘So many careers that could have been saved’

The Camden officer who lunged at a handcuffed suspect didn’t make headlines because, seconds after he opened the SUV door, one of his colleagues dragged him back outside.

“Go cool off,” the second officer said calmly, pointing down the street.

No punches were thrown, no charges were filed.

Although New Jersey has long mandated cops stop other cops from breaking the law, there hasn’t necessarily been clear direction on what those interventions should look like.

“They teach us all sorts of ways how to intervene on citizens,” said Brett Parson, a retired Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Police officer who now co-teaches the Active Bystandership for Law Enforcement program. “But not once at any academy class did they teach any of us how to intervene on each other.”

Parson’s bystandership class, known by the acronym ABLE, is a direct response to Floyd’s death.

Georgetown Law partnered with the firm Sheppard Mullin to adapt and expand on a peer intervention program already used by New Orleans police. Project leaders estimated that more than 100 agencies in dozens of states are in the process of adopting it.

The 8-hour program does not teach Good Cops how to hunt down Bad Cops.

Instead, armed with research about human behavior, trainers make the case that the right environment can push almost any officer to make a serious error.

The key is changing the environment, experts said.

Leaders argued a culture that discourages cops from stopping excessive force also discourages officers from pointing out other mistakes, with potentially fatal consequences.

Trainers shared a story of four rookie officers who once didn’t speak up when their sergeant failed to properly search or handcuff a suspect. Later, in the back of a cruiser, the man was able to slide his handcuffed hands under his legs, pull a gun out of his waistband and murder a cop in the front seat. (The teachers intentionally withheld when and where this occurred.)

During one class in July, officers debated how the younger cops should have intervened.

One suggested directly calling out the sergeant's shoddy search.

Parson wasn't having it.

"With all due respect, nobody's steppin' to a sergeant like that," he said.

Someone offered a softer approach: "Hey sarge, want me to search that guy?"

That was more realistic, Parson said.

The program uses a four-step process for diplomatically raising concerns that was developed by a former American Airlines pilot. Cockpits can also be home to strict hierarchies and big egos, and trainers praised the way airlines have emboldened flight crews to flag pilot error.

In recent decades, the number of fatal airplane crashes has dropped even as people fly more often, according to federal data.

Crucially, the program also argues that the best interventions aren't necessarily dramatic.

Mistakes made during an arrest might be due to stress that should have been dealt with earlier, trainers said. For example, a normally clean-cut officer appearing disheveled at work might just be the result of insomnia — or it could signal the cop was sleeping in his car because of a failing marriage.

"There were so many careers that could have been saved during my tenure," said Greg Hanna Jr., another trainer who retired from Washington, D.C.'s Metro Transit Police. "A lot of stuff was because of dumb things, things that could have been prevented."

Leaders said pulling a partner aside could head off graver problems.

And at a time when more New Jersey officers have recently died by suicide than in the line of duty, that conversation could also save their life, teachers said.

'Something bad's gonna happen'

The second training program began in New Jersey in 2016, when Camden was one of six departments in the country to adopt the de-escalation class.

Other agencies, including New York City, have followed.

The new approach is especially for cops dealing with residents having emotional breakdowns.

"Training in the United States on these kinds of situations has not fundamentally changed, I would say, in 25 years," Chuck Wexler, head of the Police Executive Research

Forum, said in an interview earlier this year. “When officers are confronted with a suicidal person, for example ... ICAT teaches them how to deal with this differently.”

ICAT stands for Integrating Communications, Assessment, and Tactics. Many of the videos shown in the approximately 10-hour class echoed recent police confrontations in New Jersey, including an Asbury Park man who was killed while standing in a doorway with a knife, and a man in Ventnor with a broken glass bottle who was killed after saying, “I would actually prefer to get shot.”

The program’s supporters often call similar shootings “lawful but awful,” and trainers presented ways to slow down encounters.

The longer somebody’s talking the better, teachers said.

The class included body camera footage from a 2019 standoff in South Carolina that began by daylight. By the time the armed man surrendered to police, it was approaching midnight.

At one point during the exchange, a negotiator made a promise if the man gave up peacefully: He’d get to talk to his kids with his handcuffs covered up.

Dan Alioto, a retired Maryland sheriff’s officer who co-taught the class, loved that line.

“That one sentence sent two clear messages,” Alioto said: You’re definitely going to jail, but we’ll let you see family.

However, trainers said honesty must be coupled with an honest effort to listen to a person who may want to die.

A video from California showed a 17-year-old girl approach an officer with a knife tucked in her shorts. The teenager asked what would occur if she drew her weapon.

“Then something bad’s gonna happen,” the officer responded.

The girl immediately pulled out the knife and moved toward the cop, who shot her less than two minutes later.

Part of the problem was police missed an opportunity to first start a conversation, said Shelley Katkowski, a trainer and lieutenant with Burlington police in North Carolina.

“A threat is a threat, but that officer has to go home and live knowing that he shot a child,” Katkowski said.

The girl survived, trainers said later.

'Unprecedented' solve rates

Officers from all over the state, including prison staff and investigators from at least one prosecutor's office, attended the classes in July.

They appeared fully engaged. Glances at phones were rare. The only grumbling overheard didn't concern the content, just a general frustration with having to sit through more training.

One attendee, Pine Hill Lt. Chris Witts, was sold.

Witts first encountered the de-escalation program at a conference several years ago, he said in an interview. "There's really no argument against it."

He anticipates some pushback, especially from officers worried about getting behind on calls if they devote too much time to one person.

He hopes they'll come to the conclusion that the new approach is nonetheless "safer for everybody," he said.

Other officers said veteran cops may actually be the most receptive because they've encountered so many people in crisis. Despite a national climate where many residents seem afraid to call the police, Witts wasn't the only one to say mental health calls have still increased.

Nearly 1,900 people restrained in recent months by New Jersey officers appeared to be experiencing a "mental health incident," according to state data.

Furthermore, if residents trust that cops will do everything possible to avoid violence, they'll be more likely to help with investigations, Camden Capt. Kevin Lutz said in an interview.

"The way that we police now, compared to the way we policed 10 years ago, has helped us build bonds with the community that we never had," Lutz said. "Now, with the help of the public, our solve rates are unprecedented."

Last year the department said 90% of all homicides were solved by detectives.

Early research into other departments is similarly promising.

New Orleans reported drops in excessive force and citizen complaints after adopting an earlier version of the intervention program, among other reforms, according to a Police Quarterly article. Another study found Louisville Metro cops used less physical force, and were injured less often, after taking the de-escalation course.

The state attorney general's office is spending about \$140,000 for the intervention training and around \$60,000 for the de-escalation class, according to a spokesman.

New Jersey cops were originally told to finish both programs by the end of the year, when new use-of-force rules take effect that limit when police can hit, chase or shoot suspects.

That deadline was recently pushed to April 30 because of the pandemic.

The courses' full impact may never be known.

In one of the last videos shown in the intervention class, two Seattle officers arrested a man in a hoodie.

Police pinned him to the asphalt and one placed his knee on the man's neck.

Moments later, the second cop looked up and saw the knee. That officer slid a hand under the other's thigh, lifted the leg and pushed the knee further down the man's back.

Then all three left that street without the world knowing their names.