Law Enforcement Personnel Comment on Ways to Better Serve People with Disabilities

A study funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR).

Law enforcement personnel, such as police officers and detectives, may come into contact and interact with people with disabilities. These interactions may occur if a person with a disability is a victim of a crime, if they witness a crime, or if they are suspected of criminal behavior. Sometimes, these interactions can be challenging. For example, communication may be difficult if an individual is Deaf and the officer does not use a sign language. Further, some behaviors of individuals with disabilities may also be mistaken for suspicious activity or uncooperative behavior, resulting in unnecessary negative experiences for people with disabilities in their interactions with law enforcement personnel.

Past research has found that law enforcement personnel may not receive effective training about or have little experience interacting with people with disabilities. In a recent NIDILRR-funded study, researchers asked law enforcement personnel about their experiences serving people with disabilities. The researchers wanted to find out how law enforcement personnel described interactions they had with people with disabilities. They also wanted to find out what information or resources the law enforcement personnel thought could improve their interactions with people with disabilities.

Researchers at the Rocky Mountain ADA Regional Center held focus groups with 19 law enforcement personnel from two counties in the Rocky Mountain region: a rural and an urban county, both with high crime rates. During the focus groups, the researchers asked the participants about their experiences serving individuals with disabilities including strengths, challenges, and things that could improve their interactions with people with disabilities.

The researchers found that the participants’ responses fell into four major areas:

1. Interpersonal skills: The participants described skills that are necessary when serving individuals with disabilities. These skills included patience, effective communication, and a willingness to explore all sides of a problem. The participants emphasized the importance of finding out why an event occurred, not just what occurred.

2. Complex responsibilities: The participants described being responsible to multiple stakeholders, which can create challenges when interacting with people with disabilities. For example, law enforcement personnel's first priority may be to ensure that a situation is safe in the moment. This may take precedence over
investigating why an incident occurred or determining whether an individual has a disability that could impact the situation.

3. Conflicting expectations: Related to the previous point, the participants described having competing pressures placed on them that could make it more difficult to interact effectively with people with disabilities. For example, some of the participants described being under time pressure to work quickly, which could create challenges when interacting with someone who needs more time to communicate or who uses an interpreter.

4. Improvement opportunities: The participants suggested changes that could improve the quality of interactions between law enforcement personnel and people with disabilities. A common suggestion was to have a system for storing information about individuals who are frequently involved with law enforcement, so that new officers are briefed on the specific individual’s needs and preferences, including whether or not they have a disability, their particular triggers, and things that can calm them during a crisis. Another suggestion was to make more training resources available to law enforcement personnel, especially training led by people with disabilities, and training that mimics real-life situations as much as possible.

The authors noted that increased training and resources in interpersonal skills, communication, and disability awareness could be helpful for law enforcement personnel. In addition, different jurisdictions may also have different training needs depending on the characteristics of their population and how familiar the law enforcement personnel already are with people with disabilities. The authors suggested that training may need to be tailored to these specific needs. Future research may be useful to explore relationships between law enforcement personnel and people with disabilities more deeply, and to identify and develop strategies to improve those relationships in specific communities.

To Learn More
The ADA National Network includes 10 regional centers that serve individuals with disabilities, government agencies, and private businesses in understanding their rights and responsibilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Find the nearest center online or by calling 800/949-4232.

The Midwest Regional Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) Model System Center created a series of videos for emergency personnel featuring TBI survivors discussing how their injury impacts their behavior and how that behavior can be mistaken for intoxication or aggression, or otherwise perceived as negative or challenging.

In 2018, individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and police officers in Prince George’s County, MD, participated in an innovative training program that used improvisation and real-life scenarios to promote safe and effective interactions.
To Learn More About This Study

Bezyak, J., Clemens, E., Pergantis, S., & Tis, M. (2019) Disability and law enforcement personnel: Perceptions from the Rocky Mountain region of the USA. Policing, 2019. This article is available from the NARIC collection under Accession Number J80942.

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