

Westmoreland County Park Police Learn Crisis Intervention Tactics

Training impact has an immediate effect

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(Greensburg, PA)—Two Westmoreland County Park Police officers became Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) certified on January 10 in Allegheny Township. Lt. Kathleen Logan and Officer Jim Shaffer joined 14 other officers from throughout the region in the 40-hour regional training provided by the Southwest Regional (PA) CIT team. Park Police Chief Nicholas Caesar commented, “CIT training helps the Westmoreland County Park Police to reach their goals by serving the community while acting in the best interest of Westmoreland County.”

During the first shift after the training, Officer Shaffer put last week’s training to use when he responded to a “red alert (medical emergency)” in the county courthouse—an individual was suffering a seizure. Using communication techniques practiced during role playing in the CIT course last week, coupled with his experience as an EMT, Officer Shaffer learned that the individual had taken prescription medication. After learning about possible side effects of certain prescription medication at CIT training, Shaffer deduced that the woman’s condition might be a side effect of the new medication and successfully encouraged her to seek further medical treatment at a local hospital.

The Crisis Intervention Team training concept originated in 1988 when the Memphis Police Department partnered with the Memphis Chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), mental health providers, and two local universities. Today, CIT training is used throughout the United States to improve the way law enforcement and the community respond to people experiencing mental health crises. Participants gain valuable knowledge about recognizing the signs and symptoms of mental illness, and build on the skills all police officers learn in the academy in de-escalating potentially dangerous situations.

The Southwest Regional training team is made up of volunteers from Butler and Westmoreland counties including behavioral health professionals, corrections and law enforcement personnel—including the executive director of Torrance State Hospital—and family members affected by mental illness. The week-long course featured class visits to a local drop-in center for those transitioning from residential to community treatment, where they learn life skills such as what to wear to a job interview, and an alternative school for those whose mental health issues prevent them from attending a regular school.

Park Police Lieutenant Logan noted that CIT training enhances what officers learn in the municipal police academy. She especially appreciated presentations from Viet Nam and Afghanistan-era veterans on the behavioral health challenges faced by some veterans upon returning home, as well as an exercise in which officers used a simulator to experience what an episode of schizophrenia might feel like. Lt. Logan said, “CIT

makes you take a step back and think about the fact that the people you're dealing with in law enforcement situations may be dealing with a lot that an officer might not know.”

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