

Norwalk police take steps to train for 'suicide by cop' situation

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NORWALK -- When confronted by a seemingly unstable person with a death wish, police officers become faced with the decision of defending themselves or deciding how to resolve the potentially lethal situation.

Dramatic situations such as this have ended with "suicide by cop," where a suicidal person acts in a threatening way to provoke officers to shoot and kill them.

As a result, officers are often times left with psychological scars, some deciding to leave their jobs altogether because they are simply unable to cope with the stress of what happened.

"People don't think of police officers as the victim in these situations when they truly are," said Louise Pyers, Founder and Executive Director of the Connecticut Alliance to Benefit Law Enforcement (CABLE, Inc.). "The public has a lack of understanding of what a police officer actually goes through in a high stakes situation and what the officer goes through afterward. Cops are human beings, not robots that are trained to kill. They are people."

Pyers founded CABLE in 1999 as the result of a loved one with a mental illness who was gravely wounded by police in a similar situation.

In an effort to save others from such anguish, Pyers decided to work with police departments to bring crisis intervention teams statewide to all law enforcement agencies to address issues related to mental health.

CABLE started initially with the New London police department and expanded throughout the state. In 2003, the group obtained a 501c3 status and received its first grant from the state of Connecticut in 2004.

"From when we started to now, the number of shootings of mentally ill people (in Connecticut) have gone down," Pyers said. "We can't prove a negative of who didn't get shot, but the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DHMAS) had said within a year, 1,500 people were connected to DHMAS services through the police. These situations might have ended with 'suicide by cop,' but instead they were resolved."

Pyers said officers around the state, including those from the Norwalk police department are trained on ways to try and resolve the problem in a peaceful way instead of a deadly one.

"The way a police officer approaches (the person) can make a difference, so we let them know of some of the behavioral cues to look for," Pyers said. "If officers make a softer approach and talk softly to the person, it might throw them off in a fight or flight situation. The person might

think, this officer is trying to help me and can make a huge difference. That way, the officer might, might be able to slow the situation down and get the person to where they need to be."

Pyers stressed however, that CABLE is not asking officers to compromise their safety in the situations.

"If someone is coming after the officer with a weapon, we are not asking them to slow down and talk, it's too late for that," Pyers said. "It's a terrifying situation for a police officer and they have to do what they need to do to stay safe."

According to Norwalk Police Lt. Brian Cunningham of the Training and Recruitment Division, officers that attend the 40-hour CIT training from CABLE are selected by their own police departments and are considered "CIT" officers after completion who may be dispatched to specific calls that they are now trained to handle.

"In the last 10 years or so, we've heard more about it (suicide by cop) in police training," Cunningham said. "The phrase was coined along the line about people who have had a well thought out plan for a long time but don't want to do it themselves. Someone who is rational would not point a gun at a cop, but knowing that, the logical conclusion would be that the person wanted police to shoot them."

While such a situation hasn't happened in Norwalk in recent memory, Cunningham said the CABLE training helps officers decipher what to do in such a situation, where a "gamut of instructors" teach about a variety of scenarios, legal issues and human emotions.

"People always say, "why don't you shoot the gun out of their hand" or "you could have opted to use a Taser" or "why didn't you shoot him in the leg?" Cunningham said. "But in some situations, that wouldn't be advised. Police officers are trained to use their firearm to stop a person from their actions if it's warranted. We don't shoot to maim or to shoot weapons out of people's hands." Aside from CABLE training, Cunningham said there is also a training requirement through the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA), where mental health training is conducted for all employees on a year basis.

All sworn officers also receive training in dealing with those suffering from mental illnesses as part of their 60 hours re-certification training every three years.

"There are no do overs in these situations," Cunningham said. "If I opt to use a Taser and it doesn't work, then now what? You have to use the best option and in some situations where the officer is being attacked or is in fear of losing consciousness and losing his weapon, that's a deadly force situation...at that point, it's game over for the officer."

Then, Cunningham said, once a situation like that unfolds, the officer now faces a firestorm from the media, courts, possible lawsuits and protesting, along with emotional turmoil from the shooting.

"Before all the facts are investigated, the officer will be judged," Cunningham said. "They may have to go into hiding after it, they could get sued, lose their house, these are all things officers think about in these situations."

In a study conducted by Dr. Vivian Lord of the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, 54 cases of people who attempted "suicide by cop" in North Carolina between 1992 and 1997 were analyzed. The study revealed that 94 percent were male, 63 percent were armed with guns, 24 percent had knives, three had other objects and three were unarmed.

In addition, more than 50 percent were under the influence of alcohol, 45 percent were experiencing family problems or the end of a relationship, nearly 40 percent talked about homicide with officers involved, two-thirds appeared unplanned and in 46 percent of the cases, the incidents began as a domestic argument.

However, even in situations where "suicide by cop" seems to be the logical reason for the occurrence, Pyers said something of a "psychological autopsy" is performed to gather information about the person from their family and friends to see if he/she gave off clues of wanting to die at the hands of a cop.

"There are, however cases where a person leave a note or come out and say, 'you better shoot me or I'll kill you,' which is a direct threat," Pyers said. "Some officers never get over these types of shootings, they just can't come to terms with them."