

New Bedford Police Department presents “Let Me Introduce Myself” safety program

The New Bedford police department is announcing a new program which is intended to make their response to intellectually disabled or emotionally disturbed people safer for everyone involved.

Chief Paul Oliveira credits the “Use of force” commission which was formed to review policies within the department in the fall of last year. One concern they brought to our attention was the police response to people having a condition or disability that might prevent them from responding appropriately to commands. When police are unfamiliar with the limitations or specific needs of a person, they might mistake their failure to follow directions as an implicit threat. This creates a dangerous situation which nobody wants to have imposed upon them.

It is estimated that 1 in 4 fatal law enforcement encounters involve a subject who suffers from a serious mental illness (Fuller, et al. 2016). The New Bedford police department currently utilizes mental-health clinicians who are often deployed into the field along with police officers to respond to calls involving the mentally ill or emotionally disturbed. This new program augments our efforts to lower the risk of having to using force on a person who may be better handled with more innovative tactics.

Sgt. Samuel Ortega of the department’s ‘Community Crisis Intervention Team’ took the concerns of the “Use of Force” commission and spearheaded an effort to make a change. The end result has manifested in what’s become the “Let Me Introduce Myself” program. How does it work? Citizens notify our

department of a person of concern. This can be someone who is unable to follow basic commands, is prone to getting lost, may have an increased fear of police or authority figures, unable to communicate their own needs, might have an aversion to being touched by strangers, etc. A form is accessible through the department's website. On this form, you can provide information regarding your person of concern including their address, the name they answer to, diagnosis, emergency contacts, verbal or non-verbal, etc.

When the form is received, the information on it will be put into "caution" notes for the individual listed and the address where they reside. In the event that the police respond to a situation involving the person or address, officers can be better prepared to meet their individual needs or limitations.

"No police officer wants to use force on anyone they encounter but using force on someone and later finding out that they were unable to comply with you is especially heart-breaking. In our roles as guardians to the community, we want to resolve as many

situations as we can in the most peaceful manner possible. Filling out this form will help us to get the critical information that we need in order to do just that. If you'd like to bring a person of concern to our stations to meet our officers so that we can get to know one another before a crisis happens, I encourage that also and we will accommodate," said Chief Paul Oliveira.

Mayor John Mitchell stated, "This program is directly in line with our emphasis on community policing. With a better understanding of the physical and mental health conditions of individuals they encounter, police can tailor their responses to allow those individuals to get the help they need while ensuring public safety," Mayor Jon Mitchell said. "I applaud Chief Oliveira and the Police Department for taking this inclusive, personal approach to policing and emergency response."

If you would like to make us aware of a person we should know about, access the form at www.newbedfordpolice.com. Under "Resources". Scroll down to "Forms" and find the "Let Me Introduce Myself Disability". Once filled out, you can upload and e-mail it to Samuel.ortega@newbedfordpd.com. You may also deliver it in hand to either the NBPD headquarters at 871 Rockdale Ave., or the South-end Public Safety Complex located at 912 Brock Ave. in an envelope marked for Sgt. Samuel Ortega.

1.) Fuller, Doris & Lamb, H. & Biasotti, Michael & Snook, John. (2016). Overlooked in the Undercounted: The Role of Mental Illness in Fatal Law Enforcement Encounters. 10.13140/RG.2.1.1655.9128.

For more on this program, please click <https://youtu.be/IiiJhNFNbro>