



trained in techniques to deal with people in crisis

Jeff Saunders Record-Courier

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The young woman was upset as she stood — barely — on the concrete wall, her hands grabbing the fence, Interstate 76 below.

It was on the Sandy Lake Road overpass late at night on April 8. Brimfield Police Officer Matthew Kennedy climbed on top of the cruiser's hood and the woman agreed to let him take her hands through the fence, to hold onto her as they waited for the Rootstown Fire Department ladder truck. They got Officer James Carrozzi's rifle strap around her to make her more secure until firefighters could get her down. Meanwhile, Kennedy said, he talked to her, trying to find out why she was there.

The woman, in her mid-20s, told him she had children, the youngest, an infant, having a serious medical issue that required surgery. She also was in trouble for assaulting another woman, she had job troubles and problems with alcohol.

“She got into an argument with her family, stormed out and decided she was just going to take her life,” Kennedy said.

Meet Portage County's crisis intervention team

Kennedy and Carrozzi are among a group of police officers who are part of a crisis intervention team, or CIT, in Portage County, meaning they have had training in how to deal more effectively with people who are in some kind of mental health crisis.

“I just kind of talked to her, calmed her down, let her tell her side of the story,” Kennedy said of the woman on the bridge. “I explained to her that no one wants to see [her kill herself]. She has a long life to live and she has to be a mother to these kids, they only have one mother. And she agreed this probably wasn't the best way.”

After the fire department got her off the overpass, she was taken to a hospital for evaluation and treatment.



agencies met in the Streetsboro Police Department's training room for a week-long, 40-hour CIT course, much of it to practice using a skill that perhaps many people take for granted.

"You just talk," said Streetsboro Police Sgt. Andy Suvada, one of the first police officers in the county to receive CIT training and now a trainer himself. "Get a general idea of what's going on with them and work through that."

CIT training began in the county about 15 years ago to deal more effectively with situations that can sometimes end badly.

'I think every officer who's gone through it finds it useful'

"I think every officer who's gone through it finds it useful," said Dr. John Garrity, executive director of the Mental Health and Recovery Board of Portage County, which introduced CIT in the county in 2006. "It's kind of a new set of tools and for some of them, they've never really been trained in de-escalation techniques. Plus it helps them recognize the signs, the warning signs, that someone might be in a psychiatric crisis. The officers report that they find the information very helpful. I think it makes them safer and it makes clients out there, individuals that maybe have mental illness crisis, safer and we reduce having to use some level of force."

The Streetsboro Police Department's involvement in the CIT program has been prominent. The hall of fame of the Utah-based non-profit organization CIT International named Suvada, the department's former CIT coordinator, its 2011 Officer of The Year.

Different training sites

Initially, Kent State University was the training site. Kent State University Police Officer Jeff Futo, who has served as the department's CIT coordinator during his 23-year career there, said the training also makes police part of the mental health community.

"A big part of the crisis intervention team is that everybody's communicating with each other, talking to each other, utilizing mental health services as much as possible so that we can mitigate the possibility of police showing up at somebody's door," said Futo.

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county. He said communities could hire more social workers as an additional option, as some have proposed, but this should not replace the CIT.

“You’re going to have crisis calls that police are going to,” he said. “There’s going to be calls with people in crisis where there are safety concerns. People who are specifically trained to deal with those safety concerns need to go in and mitigate the chance that someone’s going to get hurt. They can assess the situation at that point and bring in other resources if they have the ability to do it.”

The Portage County Sheriff’s Office was also a training site for a few years, but for as long as a decade, training has been at the Streetsboro Police Department due to ample space in its training room, said Suvada. And Suvada, with his career “winding down,” has turned over his duties to Streetsboro Patrolman Joshua Bartholomew, who since July 2020 has also been CIT coordinator for the entire county.

“We go through a variety of de-escalation-type things that we talk about,” said Bartholomew. “We also bring in a variety of speakers that talk about a variety of disabilities just to try and get some insight into those disabilities that individual are maybe dealing with.”

Work for actors

In the past, training using practice scenarios was offered once annually in the spring, except last year when due to the pandemic, no training was offered. But Garrity said that starting this year, there will be two courses offered, with the second coming in October.

“We have professional actors that have worked with us for some time,” he said. “The officers learn de-escalation techniques and things like that and then there’s feedback and critiques.”

Suvada said there’s no set formula for what to say, no real script to follow.

“What we teach the students — I’ve been teaching quite a few years — you kind of throw against the wall and see what sticks,” he said. “Sometimes it might be, you start talking about family. Sometimes you might be talking about hobbies or things that interest them. Sometimes you might like something that they’re wearing on their person, like a brightly colored pair of glasses that you might take an interest in, to kind of take their mind off the crisis at hand.”

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approach, he said. Getting people comfortable with you, talking to them on their level. Giving them some of your personal information, saying, 'hey, I'm a father, too. I have kids as well.' Kind of connecting with them as best we can and get rapport with them. Just kind of be their friend as quick as you can."

'I went kicking and screaming'

When Suvada took the CIT training course in 2007, he was an unlikely candidate for the program.

"Way back in the day, I was one of those guys who liked to write a lot of tickets and arrest a lot of people," he said.

But then, his superiors basically ordered him to go through the training.

"I went kicking and screaming," he said.

He had success from the beginning, however, and became a go-to for "everything mental-health related." In one early call, a woman was upset and threatening to kill her husband and herself.

"This lady, when I walked in, had two butcher knives in her hands," he said. "She was sitting in front of a bunch of potatoes and she was irate. She was screaming about her husband. So I got in there and using the concepts, thinking outside the box, I sat down not more than, probably, 5 to 10 feet from her and just started talking to her. After a good half hour, 45 minutes, she seemed to calm down enough to get her to walk out to the ambulance and go to the hospital."

Suvada rode to the hospital with her and she spoke about demons talking in her head and eventually asked if she could shake his hand.

"I said, 'sure you can shake my hand' and she said she's passing her demons onto me, which kind of takes you back a bit when you don't hear that on a frequent basis," said Suvada. "Soon after, I talked to her again and she was on her meds and she was fine and she and her husband became kind of friends, close to me through the CIT program, and we talked a lot."



received from the Criminal Justice Coordinating Center of Excellence, which in turn received the money from the Department of Ohio Mental Health and Addiction Services to support CIT programming statewide.

Portage County: Portage Crisis Intervention Team for police to expand mental health outreach

Garrity said one goal is to have departments collect standardized data on their experiences with CIT.

“So we can see who’s being served, look at the linkage to community service, look at some of the needs CIT officers encounter and incorporate that into our training,” he said.

Garrity said that since 2006, about 200 police officers have been trained and the ultimate goal is to get all police officers, as well as jail corrections officers, trained. More training sessions could be offered, he said, if the demand is there.

Suvada said he believes most Streetsboro officers are trained. Bartholomew said smaller departments have some challenges.

“Some of the smaller agencies in the county have a hard time sending their officers because they have part-time officers,” he said. “They can’t often get off of their full-time job to come do the 40-hour training.”

But, Bartholomew, who was trained 10 or 11 years ago and now teaches CIT training, said the effort is worth it.

“It opened my eyes a lot back then and it helps me on calls right now because it helps me realize that we need to slow down and talk to people,” he said.

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