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Training helps first responders better understand mental illness, cognitive disabilities

VESTAVIA HILLS – Officers and first responders with Vestavia Hills Police Department are currently participating in a unique training program specifically designed to help them identify typical behaviors seen in persons with a broad range of disabilities and mental illnesses.

Persons with cognitive disabilities or mental illnesses will often have different reactions to stressful situations than persons without those disabilities. Led by staff from the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services (ADRS), the training aims to help first responders recognize those behaviors in individuals who exhibit them, and teach them how to react accordingly.

The training comes as a direct response to several documented incidents involving officers dealing with people with disabilities.

“The actions of persons with disabilities are often misinterpreted, and disability as a whole is a topic that is often misunderstood,” said Samantha Wadsworth, ADRS rehabilitation specialist. “The goal of this training is to heighten the awareness of our first responders when they approach a person with a disability. In the process, we’re giving them the tools to adequately de-escalate needlessly dangerous situations.”

Approximately 30 uniformed officers will attend a Feb. 1 training being held from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at Vestavia Hills City Hall. The training is the third of five scheduled sessions. About 90 uniformed officers with Vestavia Hills PD will have completed the training at the conclusion of the final session on Feb. 12.

“In my 28 years as a police officer, I have never participated in a class quite like this one,” said Cpl. James Coleman, who attended the Jan. 19 session. “As an officer, we are usually asked to get things done quickly — to get in and get out. My first takeaway from the training is that typically isn’t going to be the best method when interacting with a person with a disability. Patience and calmness are key for positive outcomes in those situations.”

By recognizing how individuals with disabilities respond to emergency situations, law enforcement officials can better help them through the situation, said Sgt. Eddie Crim, Vestavia Hills PD public liaison officer.

“There’s always a human behind that badge,” said Crim. “We are all sworn officers because we want to help. We respond to all sorts of calls, and trainings like these ensure that we always put our best foot forward to help all people in the best way possible.”

Vestavia Hills City Hall is located at 1032 Montgomery Highway.

The Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services is the state agency whose mission is to enable Alabama’s children and adults with disabilities to achieve their maximum potential.

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