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Disability Awareness— Know What to Say, What Not to Say



Inside:

The Impact of the Repeal of GML §207-M

Supreme Court Weighs In on Domestic Violence & Firearms

Chief Testifies Before Congressional Subcommittee

Conference Information Inside →

Disability Awareness

Know What to Say, What Not to Say



BY DAVID V. WHALEN, STATEWIDE PROJECT DIRECTOR

Understanding how to properly address someone is paramount in establishing a rapport with the person. If we aren't sure what to say or how to say it, it may indicate our lack of understanding and show a degree of disrespect. Civilians have a comfort level with law enforcement when they are addressed in a manner that indicates the officer is open to a professional interaction.

With individuals with disabilities, the concept of Person First Language evolved from a lack of awareness by the general public on what to say, and what not to say. Here is a rundown of what an officer needs to know to interact with a person with a disability:

- If a person has a disability, don't describe them with the disability first. For instance, a boy has autism –he is not 'an autistic boy'. Acceptable descriptions include 'a person who is...', 'a person with a...', 'person who has...' and then the disability. When we say the disability first, we don't recognize the person, our focus is on the disability.
- Avoid the 'ics', epileptic, spastic, diabetic, schizophrenic. We tend to say 'he's epileptic', and then we focus strictly on the disability, and not the person.
- It's okay to say words like 'see you later' when you're talking to someone who is blind, or 'let's go for a walk' when talking to someone who uses a wheelchair. Chances are, the person will understand and many will use these same terms.
- If someone has difficulty speaking, listening attentively or paying attention, it's okay to ask them to repeat what they said. If you understood some of what they said, note what you understood so they don't have to repeat the entire sentence.
- If someone uses a wheelchair, get to eye level if the conversation will be of any length. The best way to do this is to pull up a chair.
- The term 'mental retardation' is no longer acceptable and has

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- Disability Awareness for Police
- Disability Awareness for Police – Tips
- Communicating with the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
- Intellectual Disabilities

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been eliminated from American vernacular. The proper term is intellectual disability.

- People are not 'stricken with', 'suffer from' or are a 'victim of' a disability. They simply have them.
- Treat adults as adults. Many people will talk down to an adult if they have a disability.
- If you offer assistance to a person with a disability, wait until the offer is accepted and then listen to the person's instructions. Don't assume everyone needs assistance.
- Speak directly to the person with the disability if they are the subject of the call, not the people around them. If they use an interpreter, do not talk to the interpreter, talk to the person who is using the interpreter.

For more information, contact Niagara University's First Responder Disability Awareness Training program at 716-286-7355 or go to www.fr-dat.com

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