Disability Awareness Training Coming to Missouri

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On a March day, six years ago, a 16-year-old Greenville, S.C. teen with autism jumped to his death... from the back of an ambulance.

Ben, a young adult with Duchene Muscular Dystrophy had his bones broken twice when lifted improperly even though he advised EMTs of the best way to lift him.

A blind man in White Plains, N.Y. simply said he had enough and walked home with an open head wound when the EMT denied his service dog access to the ambulance.

These are just a few of the incidences of what might occur if an EMT is not sensitized and educated in how to accurately and appropriately respond to persons with disabilities (PWDs). There is why Niagara University’s (NU) First Responder Disability Awareness Training and identify a disability based on actions, speech, or presentation gives the responder an advantage as well as comfort and ease moving forward. This occurred on a fall day last year. NU advisory council member, founder of Autism Up and parent of Teddy, a 13
program was created. It is the nation’s only comprehensive training for first responders, and the training is coming to Missouri.

With an increasing number of individuals with disabilities in the U.S (18.7% according to the 2010 US census), there’s a growing and immediate need to train first responders to provide aid to individuals with disabilities in emergency situations. While no statistic is available for EMS, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (US DOJ) 50-80% of an officer’s day is encountering a person with a disability. It would stand to reason this number is also slanted when it comes to EMS response. Many EMTs will note their frequent visits to homes that service individuals with developmental disabilities. Disabilities present across a wide spectrum, and while some may never pose a challenge to emergency medical services (EMS), an inordinate amount of 911 calls will involve PWDs. Often, the response will need to be altered, questions may need to be worded differently, sirens and lights may need to be turned off, and demeanor and approach will need to be adjusted.

Conversely, the ability to recognize a child with autism recounts this occurrence after her son’s bus was in a minor accident. When she got to the scene, it was obvious that most of the first responders (across all disciplines) did not know how to interact with Teddy. Her panic level increased until she got to him and the EMT working directly with him was doing everything right. When she commented on how well he was doing, he responded that he had been trained in NU’s Disability Awareness Training program.

The Missouri Council on Developmental Disabilities (CDD) recognized the need for this training and has granted NU a two-year contract (with the potential for a third year) to bring the program to the state. This was driven by the MO CDD victims task force, which addresses the victimization of PWDs, noted by the US DOJ as seven times more than an individual without a disability. This, coupled with the new regulation that calls for MO law enforcement to “be trained in how to respond to individuals with mental and cognitive impairments” spurred their decision. MO CDD executive director Vicky Davidson moderated the presentation NU gave at the July 2013 National Association on Councils of Developmental Disabilities
(NACDD) conference and saw the need at that time. The new regulation provided the impetus. NU has an already established program based on the grant they received from New York’s CDD in 2010, where they also received the 2014 Forging Pathways Award.

There is a customized training for EMS, firefighters, law enforcement, and 911 operations. A two-day Train-the-Trainer course allows recognized trainers to own the end-product and train their departments as it fits their schedule. Topics include autism, intellectual disability, Tourette syndrome, mental/behavioral health, low vision/blind, hard of hearing/deaf, traumatic brain injury, dementia, physical disabilities, and learning disabilities. Content also addresses etiquette/interaction skills, Person First Language, victimization/abuse, service animals, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and speech challenges/communication.

The course equates to eight total hours of training, however, trainers can provide it in increments. Also provided will be an extensive amount of handouts, a resource manual (which is being developed into an app), and a website (active now), of which will now contain Missouri specific resources and content. NU has also developed an EMS online course in collaboration with the Center for Healthcare Education (Riverdale, CA) that will go live by the beginning of 2017.

The Missouri grant award began in July and project director Dave Whalen has made two trips this year to Missouri, meeting with key players from first response and the disability community. He has met with Missouri EMS Association President Ruby Mehrer and EMS Bureau Chief Les Jobe to begin the process of MO EMS customization, accreditation, and schedules for training, targeted to begin spring 2017.

For more information, go to frdat.niagara.edu or call 716-286-7355.

About the Author

David Whalen founded Disability Awareness Training in 2004. He has presented to more than 600 audiences. A former employee of Niagara County ARC, he is President of the Williamsville Special Education PTSA, Chair of the Town of Amherst’s (NY) committee on disabilities, member of the Erie County (NY) Disability Advisory Board, past Chair of Parent Network of WNY, past member of NYS Independent Living Council, member of the Niagara County Behavioral Health and Justice Committee, and FEMA-trained in Access and Functional Needs. In 2016, Dave received the Advocate of the Year from Deaf Access Services of WNY.