

Testimony to the
Improving Police Interactions with the Disability Community
Subcommittee of the
Police Transparency & Accountability Task Force

by
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I am Walter Glomb, the Director of the Connecticut Council on Developmental Disabilities and I am here to speak about improving police interactions with individuals who live with developmental disabilities in Connecticut. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to this subcommittee about this critical topic.

The Connecticut Council on Developmental Disabilities is entirely funded by the federal Administration on Community Living to assist the State of Connecticut in developing a comprehensive system of community services, individualized supports, and other forms of assistance that enable individuals with developmental disabilities to exercise self-determination, be independent, be productive, and be integrated and included in all facets of community life. This includes having safe and inclusive communities.

Developmental disabilities are lifelong mental or physical impairments that result in substantial functional limitations in three or more areas of major life activity and may include intellectual disabilities, autism, behavioral disorders, psychiatric disabilities, epilepsy, blindness, deafness, and mobility impairments.

I will not dwell on the many specific examples of tragic outcomes of interactions between police and people with disabilities when behaviors were misunderstood and misinterpreted. The fact that we are here is testimony to the problem. Whether it is the death of a young man with autism by the use of force by a police officer or the wrongful conviction of a man with Dandy Walker syndrome, these outcomes are unacceptable and we all must do all that we can do to prevent them.

How? I would suggest three categories of activities:

- ✓ Community engagement
- ✓ Training
- ✓ Accountability

I would offer two examples of community-centered approaches that were suggested by participants in Council programs. The first is facilitated discussions between local law enforcement and members of the community who have developmental disabilities. Such discussions inform local law enforcement about the specific needs and concerns of the people in their community and allow police officers to explain their methods to those individuals. The second is improved quality of information about people who have disabilities in local computer aided dispatch systems. Though most dispatch centers in Connecticut have the capacity for this information, there is no standard practice for collecting information on the needs of people with disabilities within each town. Besides having information about individuals embedded in

dispatching systems, there are now mobile phone apps that connect to beacons worn by individuals and broadcast personal data to the first-responder's phone.

For training, the Connecticut General Statutes already require some training about juveniles with autism spectrum disorder or nonverbal learning disorder, and about serious mental illness. There is nothing about autistic adults; nothing about behavior disorders; nothing about intellectual disabilities; nothing about dementia, epilepsy, deafness, blindness, or other developmental disabilities. Why is training required only for those two narrow populations? What training is offered to support the Blue Envelope program and why is such a program limited to people with autism? Why not expand the training to a broader spectrum of disabilities that could be misunderstood by a law enforcement officer? What is the role of technology in training? The same company that developed the taser now offers a virtual reality system to train police officers about how to handle situations involving people with disabilities.

Police officers in schools are a special case. The treatment of students who have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is governed by special federal and state laws. Are these officers adequately trained in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act? Do these officers know which students have IEPs? How are parents and educators addressing interactions with police officers in students' IEPs?

Other states have taken the lead. The Arc of the United States has a National Center on Criminal Justice and Disability that is funded by the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Assistance and offers the Pathways to Justice program. The Vera Institute of Justice has a National Initiative to Improve Police Responses to Persons with Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities. In New Jersey, people with disabilities are included in emergency drills. The state of Maryland has implemented a training developed at Loyola University Maryland. Massachusetts has the Autism and Law Enforcement Education Coalition (ALEC), which fosters better understanding of autism spectrum disorders by public safety personnel. I encourage this subcommittee to hear from an ALEC trainer.

Some states have passed statutes for procedural justice and protections for people with intellectual disabilities who are interviewed or questioned by law enforcement officers.

Likewise, individuals with disabilities may need to be educated about how to behave in engagements with police officers. What training is available from public safety officials for individuals with developmental disabilities and their families?

Training is worthless if it is not reflected in the behavior of police officers. This is an issue for supervision in any organization, how to hold people accountable for their actions? For a start, an organization needs data, i.e. it needs reliable reporting of incidents that involve people with disabilities. Do we record the disability, if any, of the victims of use of force by police officers?

Finally, let us remember that people with disabilities are also victims of crimes and may experience a higher rate of crime. For example, individuals with disabilities are seven times more likely to be victims of sexual assault than those without disabilities. Training and community engagement must also address communication with victims who may be unable or unwilling to communicate by conventional means.

Thank you.